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Two Big Complete Western Novels

BOOTHILL LOVES A PILGRIM . . . . . **Dan Cushman** **46**
Rimfire Range's hardcase crew learned their lesson pronto: "Don't ever kick a boiled hat, 'specially a tenderfoot's . . . for it's likely to be filled with six-gun blastin' powder."

HIDES FOR THE HANG-TREE BREED . . . . . **Curtis Bishop** **96**
Cattlemen's blood ran hot. Beef wasn't worth a buzzard's right eye. But hides were coining dinero for the range-wolf with a trail-fast pinto and a sharp skinning knife.

A Rangeland Novelet

RED RIDERS OF THE REDONDO . . . . . **Rollin Brown** **4**
A gunhawk ghost rode out of the past into Harris' life, death-struck, and vanished in the shadow of a bitter night. But blood of the damned traced the killer's brand . . . and the battle was on.

Four Fast Short Stories

TINHORN TROUBLE . . . . . **Ben Frank** **34**
Tinker reckoned there's more than one way to skin a cat—or a coyote like Jule Hobart.

THE MUSIC BOX KID . . . . . **John A. Saxon** **39**
Could the harmless-lookin' little guy hit leather like he pounded those ivories?

DEALER'S CHOICE . . . . . **Lee Wells** **74**
The fool kid had won a few dollars . . . and now he thought he could slap his brand on the whole world.

LOCO ON THE LOOSE . . . . . **Richard Brister** **83**
Ridin' herd on Old Sam's spoiled brat was a full-time chore.

A Cowboy Poem

"OLD ONE-EYED BUCK" . . . . . **Joe Haight** **94**
Three lives were lost a'count of a fool who ruined a horse for life.

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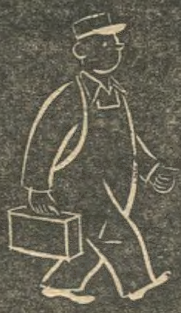

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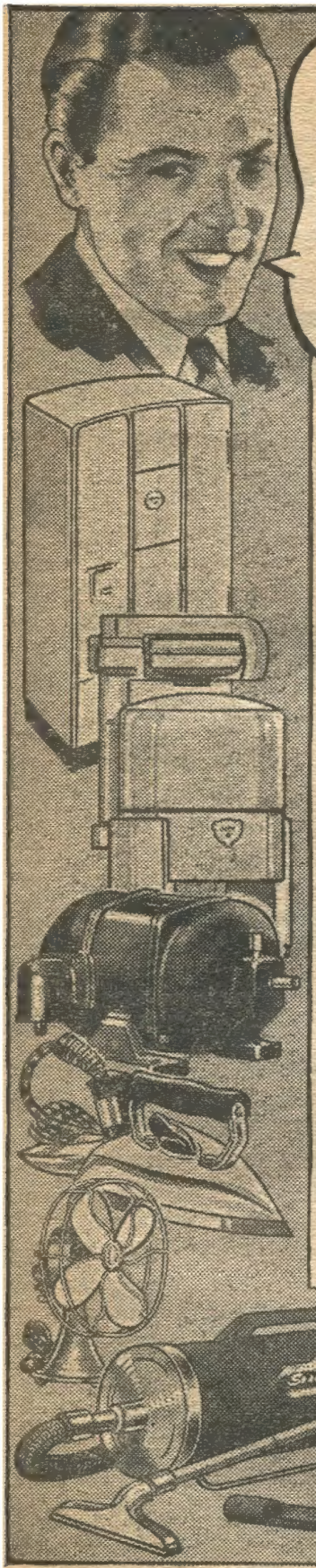

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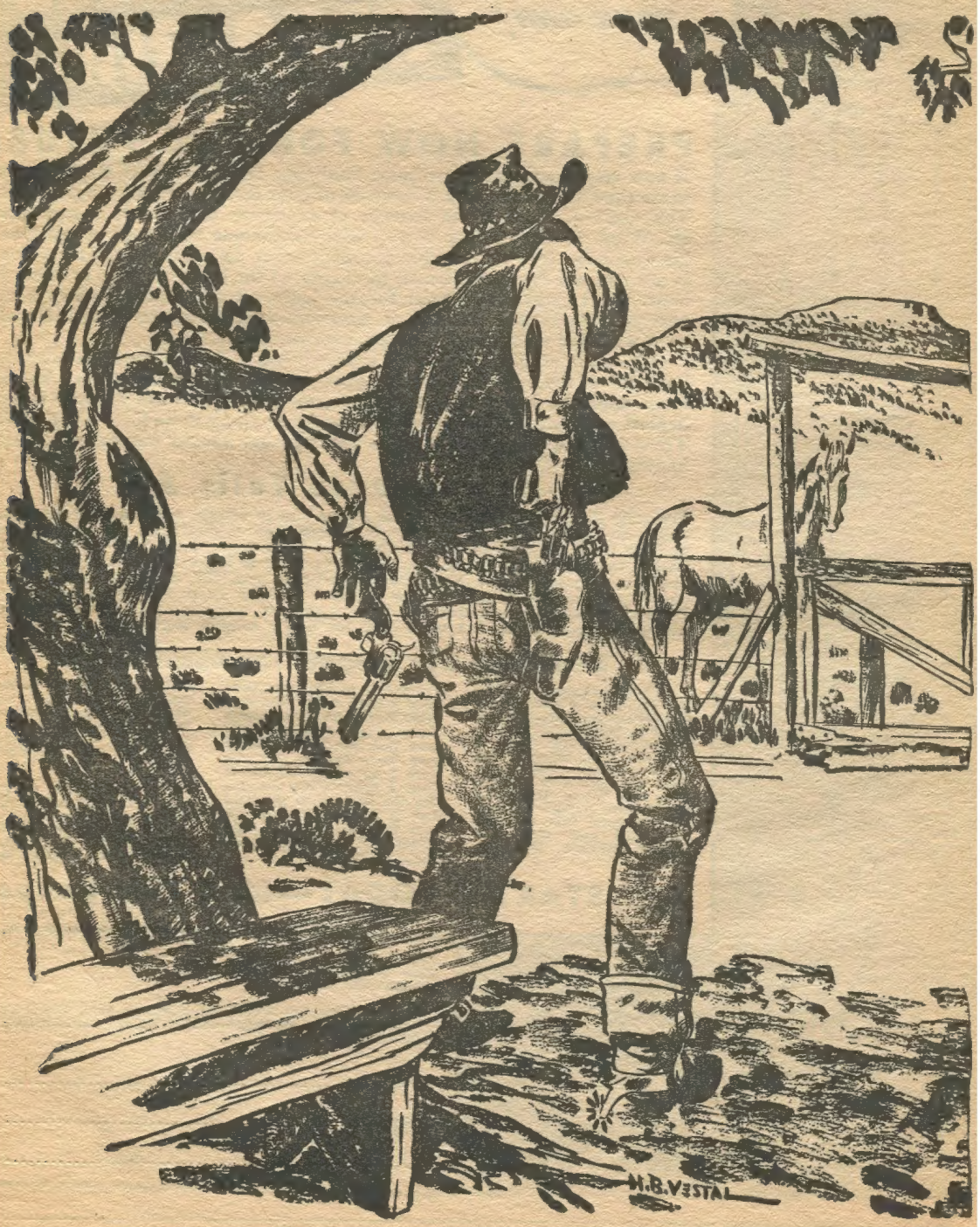
RED RIDERS OF THE REDONDO

By Rollin Brown

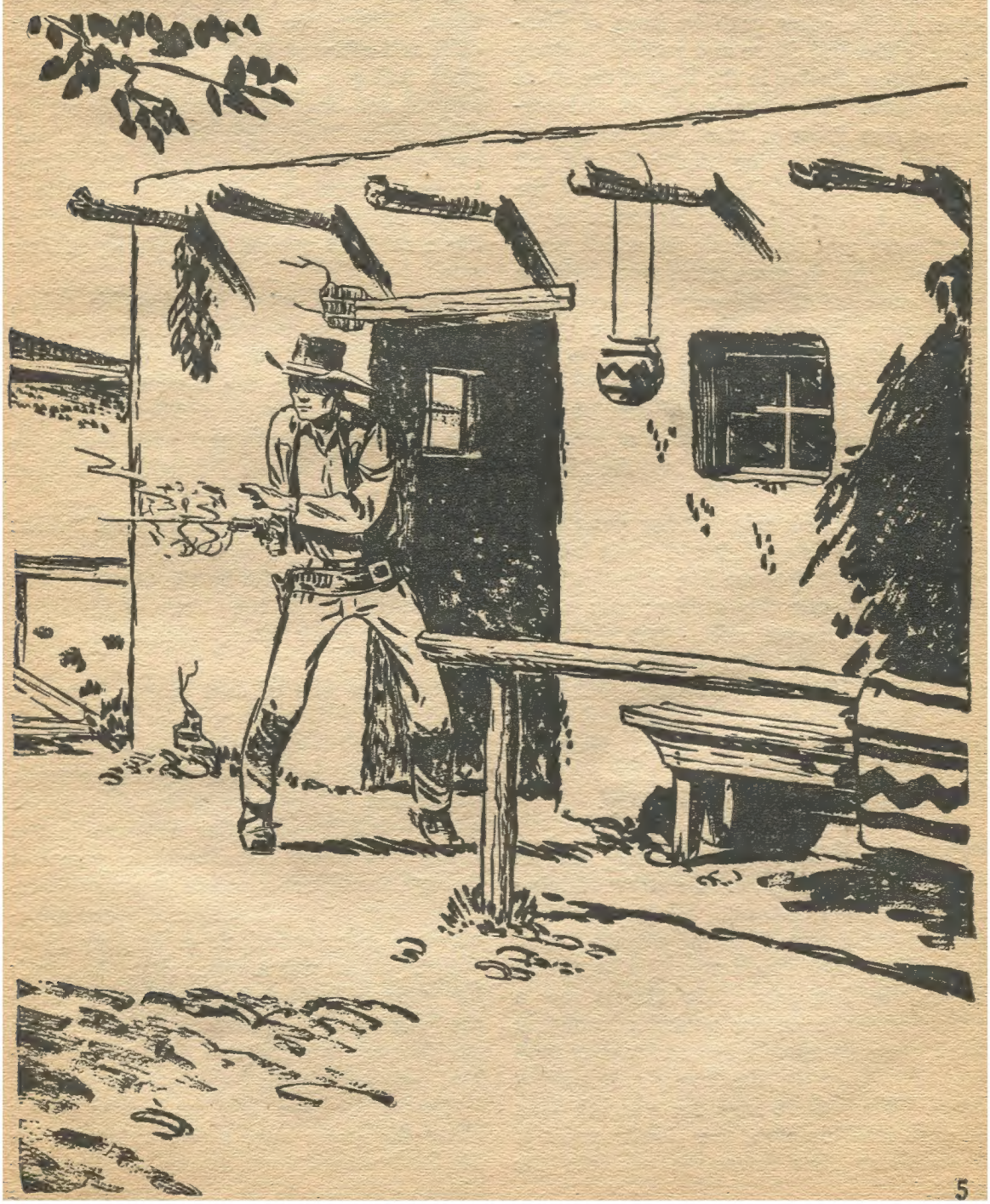
A gunhawk ghost rode out of the past into Harris' life, death-struck, and vanished in the shadow of a bitter night. But blood of the damned traced the killer's brand . . . and the battle of the Redondo was on.



THE WAGONS drifted south along the Corralitos Hills, pausing among the edge draws and ravines while riders scoured the brush; veered off to the eastward then across the far bottom flats where Bannon cattle grazed. At last the roundup circled back toward Clearwater town and the wide mesa rim of the Redondo, their job only half-completed after three wearisome weeks.

Tipton Harris and young Link Scott reached Clearwater's dusty, hoof-pocked street around seven-thirty in the evening. They had their drinks in the Pronghorn; put their knees under a table with a white cloth in the St. George Hotel.

It was past eight by the round-faced clock in the St. George lobby by the time they had finished, too late to ride on another six miles to the Bannon ranch house and risk rousing old Tom Bannon's temper if the family had already gone to bed. There were plenty of Bannon riders in the roundup to whom those ranch yards were



home, but Harris wasn't one of them. He came from the Redondo.

So he stood on the edge of the hotel porch in the light-sprinkled darkness—lean, sunburned and six-foot-two in his stub-heeled boots—and thought of Connie Bannon and her sister and hoped somehow that he could manage to see Connie before another long month passed.

"Town seems mighty dead," Link said at his elbow, finishing his cigarette. "How about a game of pool, Tip?"

Tipton Harris agreed. They crossed street to the other curb in front of Danmeyer's General Store and paused to study the window display in the light of the street lamp there. Danmeyer's was on one corner; across from it stood the bank with a night lamp burning dimly behind tall windows. Beyond, in the middle of the next block, rose the frame structure of the courthouse and its steeple in which hung the bell that on more than one occasion had summoned the citizenry to meet some emergency—like the day when the upper shaft of the Stanton Mine caved in and trapped the shift underground, or the time when the outlaw Colingo had shot his way into the street. That last was close to Tipton Harris whose uncle had died in the affair.

"Lissen!" Hank said. "What was that?"

Tip Harris listened, but did not hear it again. "Sounded to me like somethin' had hit the bell—not the striker; you could hear that a couple miles—but different. Sort of soft." He listened once more, and laughed at himself. "Shucks! Must be some blacksmith in the neighborhood shoein' a horse by lantern light. Hammer struck his anvil is all."

"I dunno," Link said doubtfully.

THE horseman came rushing out of blackness along the side street, driving spurs into his mount. Link, who had stepped out a pace from the corner, leaped back. The rider didn't miss him by twelve inches, slashing past. Tip Harris saw a streak of white on the animal's blood-bay flank, the man asaddle leaned far over with his face down in the horse's streaming mane. Then there was the stinging fling of dust into his eyes, the cloudy swirl of it following that horseman off into the night.

"Hey!" Harris yelled after the rider. "You near run down a man. Come back here!" He shook his fist.

They heard the sounds of the rider racing on along the cross-street, dimmed when hoofs struck the grassland out beyond. Link Scott brushed off the seat of his pants.

"Aw, I ain't hurt none," he said.

They had crossed on over the side street, passed the bank and were aiming for the bright streak of the Pronghorn's doorway at the other end of the block when the explosion knocked out windows behind them. There was the solid, shaking blast of it and afterwards the tinkle of window glass falling to walk planks. Something toppled and crashed around corner on the side street. The night lamp in the bank had gone out; thin puffs of dust hung suspended against the glow of the Danmeyer corner light. Link Scott had ducked like a rabbit in against the building at their side.

Tip's fingers were scraping his thigh, trying to locate holster and weapon that were not there. The town ordinance in Clearwater forbade the carrying of lethal hardware on the street; and so their weapons and gunbelts reposed with others on a special shelf in the Pronghorn devoted to this law-abiding purpose.

"What was it?" Link whispered. "What did that?"

Harris grabbed him by the arm. "Come on, quick! It's the bank—somebody's blowed the bank open. Neither of us is armed!"

That thin film of dust blown from the interior of the bank through shattered front windows still hung against the light of the corner street lamp. Hardly ten seconds had passed. They were racing on over the uneven walk planks after weapons in the Pronghorn before men began to pour out through the bright-streaked doorway there. From over on the east side of town somewhere a gun barked three or four times—fast. There was a closer shot. It struck the saloon's frosted front window high in the frame and shattered it. The men in the doorway wheeled and dove and scrambled over each other back into shelter.

That close gun laid its heavy report along the street once more. Harris with his head turned back, trying to locate the hidden rifleman as he ran, saw the globe

of the Danmeyer corner lamp explode into darkness. That left the whole bank corner black. He was right behind Link as Link Scott jumped and cleared the sill of the Pronghorn with a leap.

The near gun slammed out its third shot. The hanging lamp in the near end of the saloon room, visible now through the shattered windows, swung wildly on its chain from the ceiling; a thin stream of kerosene spurted from its polished brass bowl and ignited. The lamp became a swinging torch that sprinkled the room with flaming fuel. Louis Treviño, the barkeep, threw his wet bar rag into the conflagration. Somebody yelped with pain. Louie reached for his bar pail and tossed its contents over a man who clawed at his smoking shirt.

Link Scott, ending his leap through the doorway against the solid front of the bar, picked up a cuspidor from underfoot and threw it into the blaze. Link followed this with bottles of beer which had been stacked in a fancy pyramid atop the bar, smashing one bottle after another into the widening circle of flames on the floor. Harris ran on back toward the rear and the red-painted fire barrel against one wall with a couple of pails on a rack at its side. Louie Treviño, of course, had long since used the water in the fire barrel as a handy supply for mopping around the place.

It was probably this misplaced stroke of fate that saved the Pronghorn Saloon from burning to the ground that night, for water has a way of spreading rather than extinguishing an oil fire. Harris raced on into the alley behind, filled the two pails with dust and dirt scraped up in his hands, and carried them back. By now he had help. Within four or five minutes the fire had been put out and the Pronghorn was saved.

A rear lamp over the pool tables still gave light through an oily, stinking haze of smoke, and Louie Treviño reached for bottle and glasses and gratefully began to set out drinks on the house.

"What—what," Link Scott asked, remembering, "has happened by now at the bank?"

WHAT had happened at the bank was all finished. The big iron door of the vault lay on its face, torn from lock and hinges, the weight of it splintering floor boards as it fell. The force of the explosion had knocked out every window, blown papers all over the place and loosened a crumbling brick cornice which toppled into the side street. There was a certain amount of small change still in the cashier's drawers. But nothing of much value had been left behind, and that pretty nearly included the bank building itself.

Ross Kinsman, the sheriff, lived hardly two blocks away. Kinsman was one of the first to reach the scene of the crime. It was plain by this time that the rifleman who had covered the street and systematically darkened it while his accomplices cleaned out the bank had had his stand in the courthouse bell tower. He had climbed up in the rear, straddled the roofpeak to the tower and with the aid of the bell rope secured his position there. Some cautious tugging at the rope had produced the muted bell sound Link Scott and Harris both knew they had heard.

Kinsman, running past the courthouse toward the bank, had glimpsed the flash of the man's rifle from the tower and engaged in a brief gun-battle with him. The man had coolly knotted the bell rope, forced the sheriff into cover from his point of vantage with a few well-aimed shots —one of which had torn off the sheriff's left bootheel—and clamly slid down the roof on the other side of the building, using the rope.

The blaze in the Pronghorn had occupied everybody there meanwhile. Another gun which had first raised its voice from the east side of the town had sent a crossfire of bullets past the St. George Hotel, keeping guests and the usual group of idlers in the lobby under cover till the gunman was ready to quit. That hadn't lasted more than three or four minutes.

"But plenty long enough from the looks of all this," Sheriff Kinsman stated, surveying the gutted interior of the bank by lantern light.

He had stationed Danmeyer, rotund and ruddy, nightshirt tucked into his trousers, out in front and one of the Cahill brothers in the side-street doorway to keep the crowd back. First entrance to the bank seemed to have been gained by sawing out a bar in a small alley window behind.

"Tell him about that rider, Tip," Link

urged. "About the horseman who near rode me down at the corner just before the blast. I didn't see him till after he was past."

The sheriff looked around. He was a big man with hairy, freckled hands and a sweeping blond mustache and eyes that were like little pale blue marbles set between sun-squinted lids. He had come into office following the Colingo affair and the death of Tip Harris' uncle who had been sheriff then. He was a cold man and yet a kindly one as Tip well remembered from that day, now five or six years gone by.

"What's this about some rider, Tipton?" the sheriff asked.

There wasn't much to tell. The rider had had his face down in his mount's mane. The horse had a white slash on flank. Aside from that, the animal had looked like a blood-bay to Harris, although it was easy to be mistaken about a color seen under a dim street lamp. The sheriff listened and nodded in his detached, impersonal way.

"I'll keep it in mind," he commented. "Now somebody's needed to take word out to old Bannon and find Tormey if he's there at the ranch. Hop to that job, Tipton."

"Okay."

It was worth the trip just for a glance of Connie, even though he carried bad news of this sort. Old Tom Bannon owned the big share in the bank; half the business property on this street was held in title under Bannon's name. He had the two prettiest daughters in the county. He could count ten thousand head of cattle, marked by the Spearhead which was his brand, on the east bottom range, the best grass in the land.

But he was a man to be pitied all the same. Whenever Tom Bannon rode abroad to inspect some of his properties, two ranch hands carried him to his carriage and another drove for him. In ten years, since a horse had fallen with him and injured his spine, he hadn't walked. Those years had turned him bitter, sour and temperish. He was no more than a shell of his former self, sick and gaunt, often confined to his bed for weeks at a time, dependent on Bates Tormey to handle his range affairs for him.

But before Harris could leave, Sheriff Kinsman changed his mind. "No, wait a minute, Tipton," he called. "Link can get word to Bannon and bring Tormey back. Was Jake Doyle at the roundup camp on Skull Creek when you left?"

"Jake was there."

"All right. You hightail it for Skull Creek," the sheriff said. "Get Jake and whoever's at the wagons to go along with you, and head back across the Redondo. That's Doyle's home country and it's yours, and tell him I'm holdin' the two of you responsible if anybody makes his getaway across that end of the county line."

"Whatever you say, Sheriff," Harris agreed.

THEY crossed into the Redondo that night. By daybreak Jake Doyle and three ranchmen and two hands from these hills held the northward passes, and there was no fresh sign on the trails. Harris and two others guarded as many waterholes to the westerly end of the high plateau, the country here rugged and broken, turning into bare, rock-studded desert ridges that fell way beyond toward Estancia and the railroad, half a hundred miles distant. But to travel that half hundred miles, first of all a rider must have water.

They had that end of the county bottled up, a stopper in every hole. They watched and waited and wondered what had happened elsewhere by now and did not sleep much, because each rider had his own watching to tend to. They weren't building any fires to warn a fugitive. Harris had half a dried apple pie to eat that first day—a fine half of apple pie when he had left the cook wagon on Skull Creek, grabbing it from the tailboard, but damaged in his saddlebags long since beyond recognition. He tried mesquite beans after that.

The second day he just drank water. It was dark that night when Doyle came by, whistling and making all the racket possible so he wouldn't be mistaken for one of the wanted men, and told him Kinsman had sent word that they could give it up. Nothing had happened; the sheriff was still on the move. But too much time had passed. At least three men had taken part in the bank robbery—two shelling the street, a third to gather up the loot after

the safe had been blown open—and their getaway by this time was an accomplished fact.

"Hell!" Doyle swore. "They wouldn't a-come this way no how. Figure it. Figure it was you who'd looted close to thirty thousand dollars cash and securities from the bank—"

Harris' breath came out between his teeth. "That much?"

"That much," Jake Doyle said. "Well, what would you have done? Climbed up into this country where at least your tracks would sure be found?"

"No," Tip Harris decided that hypothetical question. "No, I'd have followed the open grass or took to the Corralitos south. Changed horses. Snarled up my trail across Spearhead and let the drift of range stock cover it, and been down on the edge of the Reservation by now."

"Sure," Jack Doyle growled. "It's only common sense. But here we've lost two days, and the roundup's late gettin' onto the mesa as it is. It always makes me mad. Every spring we work Spearhead first and all that end of the country, the outfits joined together. Then when saddle stock and men are both worn down thin and it's turned hot and screw worms are worse, we finally pull up into this country which is home to some of us. After that the mesa gets a once-over quick. Skip the strays, don't bother workin' out the brush—what's it matter to Bates Tormey or Spearhead? That's the way Tormey looks at it."

"I know," Harris agreed. It was an old complaint.

"Well, I tell you I don't like it," Doyle continued. "This year I started earmarkin' and brandin' my own range just as soon as it could be done. Now I ain't sayin' I lost stock to anybody other years, but I'm not denyin' it either. And if Bates Tormey raises any ruckus over my sooner brandin' it will give me some satisfaction to state a few well-known facts and laugh in his high-nosed, handsome face for once—"

"Speak up!" a rider challenged from the dark.

"Hold it, Chuck," Tip Harris called.

And Chuck Littlefield, who ranged the northwest rim of the Redondo, joined them from the rock-walled spring he guarded and heard the news Doyle had to tell.

"So them bank burglars got away clean, huh?"

"Looks that way. But not across this country. Only one man I ever knew could move through here without leavin' sign," Doyle said. "But he could ride an unbroke colt across slick rock into spots where most riders would hesitate to follow afoot. I never knew such a man with a hoss."

"Who's that?" Littlefield asked. "Oh, you mean Shane, I guess."

"I mean Shane O'Donnel," Doyle said. "What a sight for sore eyes old Shane would be to me now. There never was another like him."

"Never will be," Tip added.

II

IT was three in the morning when they reached the wagons on Skull Creek, wolfed what cold food could be found, rolled into blankets, dirty and dog-tired. Harris slept on straight through the early racket about the camp. The bright morning sun was well up in the sky when he woke with the smell of hot coffee in his nostrils and a hand shaking him by the shoulder. He grunted and rolled and tried to knock the hand away.

"What can this mean?" said a voice that was strong and deep with laughter in its depths. "From a distance looks like a roundup camp. Fires burnin'. Cooks had breakfast on them fires three hours at least. But what are them objects rolled up in blankets under the wagons' shadows? Cowhands? Cowpunchers sleepin' in the mornin'. No, no puncher ever slept past daybreak in all his ridin' days. Dead men? That must be it. 'Barney,' I tells my hoss, 'shed a tear with Shane for them dear departed sons. Once they rode the Redondo.'"

Harris sat bolt upright in his blankets.

"Shane!" he gasped. "Old Shane himself."

The man who squatted on his bootheels and studied him with a judicial air was not old in the least. His hair was black and his eyes hazel with little laughing sparks in their depths, and he had the lean hardness of youth. He wasn't a day past thirty. But there was a worn and well-traveled look about him, and none of his gear was new. This man had wandered far and seen a lot of things—some good, some bad; but

none taken over-seriously—and that showed on him, too.

"Tip, how's everything with you?" Shane asked. "How you been doin' with that stock your Uncle John left you?"

"Just fine. Everything's fine on the Redondo," Tip said. "You, Shane?"

"A day late, a dollar short, as the sayin' is." Shane grinned. "Sure, kid! It takes a spell of wanderin' to make a man glad he's home again."

Harris thought of the last time he had seen Shane, two years and more ago. He had been riding the same kind of horse as the buckskin he had dismounted from now, a lean, long-legged, Roman-nosed piece of horseflesh with stamina stamped in every muscle and bone and as mean and vicious an eye as Tip Harris had ever gazed on. That was always Shane O'Donnel's sort of a horse.

"How long have you been back, Shane?"

"Oh, couple days. Just managed to miss the excitement in town seems like."

Jake Doyle spoke up: "Shane got Dad Osbrook and his kid, put Limpy Johnson in a saddle, filled up a crew with that Frenchy who used to be a sheepherder and a couple Mexicans, and they been doin' the roundup work on Skull Creek while the rest of us whose job it is been gallivantin' around the hills. They've just brought in the first circle of the mornin'. Tonight we will be done here and can move on to the Redondo. That's the kind of a friend Shane is, that's all."

"Well, I couldn't just lie around and sleep all day," Shane said, cocking a brow at Harris. "Like some folks I couuld name."

"There's Tormey. Just rode in," Doyle stated.

Shane tilted his head around. "Sure enough. Slick an' handsome as ever and all lathered under the collar as usual. I hear Tom Bannon's picked him for a son-in-law to marry his oldest daughter Julia."

"Yeah," Doyle growled.

"What the devil has been going on here?" Tormey yelled. "Who's got together this crew of saddle bums? Who mounted 'em on Spearhead horses?"

"Well, here it comes," Shane said, and rose. As he passed the big buckskin he laid a hand on the animal's sloping rump. The buckskin's ears flattened; the animal kicked viciously with one leg. Shane dodged the hoof and laughed heartily. "Ain't had him long," he explained.

Harris pulled into his boots, rolled his bedding, tossed the roll into the Redondo wagon which belonged to Doyle, washed and grabbed a tin plate from the tailboard, speared a steak from the skillet, potatoes, biscuits, poured coffee from a blackened pot. Ten minutes later, groomed and ready to ride all day, he snagged a mount from the remuda. He raced Chuck Littlefield across the holding meadow.

Tormey had brought back six or seven Spearhead riders with him. They all looked gaunt and tired, and Tormey had not finished yet with Shane O'Donnel.

"Sure, I know everybody's in a hurry to get this roundup finished and the Redondo ain't been worked yet," Tormey was saying. "But Spearhead's got plenty stock here along Skull Creek. I'm boss on this end of the country, and I don't like it. I don't like no rag-tag crew of bums workin' Spearhead stock along with the rest. Dad Osbrook and his kid and Doyle's wagon cook was the only Redondo men on the ground. And I'm sayin' I want a Spearhead rider in the crowd whenever any brandin' is done. Who's going to pay these men anyhow?"

"Well, we run short of meat yesterday," Shane said, "so I butchered a yearlin'. Frenchy aims to take a quarter home for pay. The Mexicans just come along for the ride, and Limpy's a friend of mine. Nobody wants more pay."

"Whose yearlin' did you butcher?" Tormey shouted.

"One of mine," Shane answered.

"You ain't been home in two-three years of time."

Shane nodded. "But now an' again some neighbor of mine spots one of my old cows still on the range, and if she's got a calf followin' her he brands it for me friendly-like. The same when I see a chance to help."

Tormey wheeled his horse toward the eighty or a hundred head of bawling, dusty cattle that were the gather from the first circle of the morning. He was not a big man, but two-and-a-half inch heels on his fine special-made boots increased his height when not in the saddle. Tormey held himself so straight he always seemed to be

leaning over a little backward. He wore a neat, closely trimmed mustache; his face was smooth, boldly chiseled and handsome. His worst enemies never claimed he was either weak or ineffectual; it was the other way around. Bates Tormey was head man under Tom Bannon at Spearhead and he never wasted an opportunity to prove it to anybody.

Most of the Redondo riders had returned with Harris and Jake Doyle last night from the long watch on the mesa or reached camp on their own before dawn, and with breakfast and three or four hours of sleep to fortify them for another day, these men were drifting out from the wagons. With the Spearhead riders Tormey had brought back with him and the bobtail crew Shane O'Donnel had been working, they made a sizable gathering on Skull Creek.

It was Luke Arberg, Tormey's second in command, who pointed out the calf. Tormey's little mustache bristled.

"Whose calf is that?" he yelled.

It was what Jake Doyle had been waiting for. "Sure looks like one of mine, don't it?" Doyle said. "Underbit in the left ear, swallowfork in the other. Yep, it's earmarked that way."

"You been workin' stock this spring before the roundup started?"

"That's right, mister," Doyle said. His jaw stuck out. "Time we get back to the Redondo after workin' Spearhead's country, it's always the same. Riders tired out, horses all wore down. So the Redondo gets a lick and a promise, no matter how many mavericks run the brush. Well, I'm changin' that. I'm doin' the big end of brandin' and markin' on my own range before the main roundup's started. This year, next year, every year from now on, Tormey. But I'm only speakin' for myself."

Tormey was no longer shouting; he wasn't saying anything. He jumped his horse into the little herd, grabbing for his rope. Etiquette in this situation gave the right to catch his own calf for inspection to Doyle. But Tormey wasn't waiting for that. The end of his loop caught Tip Harris a stinging blow as he passed. The calf in dispute turned and dodged. Fast as Tormey's mount was under raking spurs, the big outlaw buckskin Shane O'Donnel rode was just as quick. Tormey threw, and Shane made his cast over the back of a steer between him and the calf.

Tormey's noose held nothing. Shane took his dallies and waited for Tip to hindleg the big calf. Both of them already saw Doyle's D Bar brand plain on the calf's side, burned a month or six weeks before.

"Now," Shane said soothingly, "anybody's likely to make a mistake. I reckon we'd find more'n one error if the past month of roundup was to be done over again."

"Let that calf go!" Bates Tormey ordered.

Jake Doyle's leathery countenance had a white look under the skin. His tight-clamped mouth was like a scar across his face.

"Let the calf go," Doyle repeated.

Twenty pairs of eyes watched that D Bar branded calf get up bawling and head back into the herd after its mother, and it wasn't necessary to rope the cow to be sure of the large Spearhead mark on her flank. At that moment nobody noticed Kinsman, the sheriff, riding across from the east with Manuel Oliveras, a rim-edge cowman of sorts, beside him and a blood-bay horse in tow.

SHANE had offered one of the only two logical explanations for a D Bar branded calf to be following a Spearhead cow. Shane's view of the matter hung in the quiet air like that, waiting for Bates Tormey's confirmation which would have settled the issue and made peace in this roundup again. But Tormey, loud-mouthed enough under most circumstances, had nothing of the kind to say. His silence was as good as an accusation that Doyle had branded a Spearhead calf in the hopes of claiming it for his own.

"All right," Doyle snapped. "I'm pulling my wagon out of this roundup right away."

Doyle plainly did not intend to offer any shamefaced denial or excuses of his own. He was always a man you could either take as he was or leave alone. Luke Arberg, his *segundo*, had drifted across to Tormey's side, followed by Tate Mounts and the four or five other returned Spearhead riders. The movement of men from the Redondo toward Jake Doyle on the other hand showed their clear belief in him.

Tormey nodded. "That will be best. Don't you or any rider that works for you come on Spearhead range again, Doyle."

A curse, the wrong word, a sudden motion could have turned it into a shootout right then. Tormey had a known reputation with a gun. Jake Doyle was holding his temper in check by a visible, straining effort of his will.

"Keep Spearhead off my end of the Redondo and we'll call it an even trade," Doyle said.

By that time Sheriff Kinsman was among them with Manuel Oliveras at his side and the blood-bay horse that had a white slash on flank led behind.

"Tipton!" the sheriff called. "Come here a minute."

Manuel Oliveras had a wife and three kids who all lived together in a single-roomed, dirty-floored shack under the mesa's rim. Oliveras ran about twenty runty, underfed cattle on the range; he traded horses and goats and tilled his half-acre corn patch, and somehow managed to live. Manuel's dark eyes sought faces among the crowd and pleaded mutely. He spread his delicate, brown-skinned hands to either side of his old whang-leather saddle while his plug of a horse stopped under him and slept in its tracks.

"Señores, I do not do thees t'ing," Manuel said, extending his hands palms up. "I am only wan poor *ranchero*. But an hones' man! I trade the horses, the goats, the cows sometime. I work my corn patch. But me—" The drama of the situation, always dear to the Mexican heart, began to take hold of him. "Señores, you accuse Manuel Rodrigo Eduardo Tomás Sanchez de Oliveras—you theenk he rob thees bank?"

"Hold it," the sheriff said. "I know damned well you didn't rob any bank. If you had a dollar you'd be drunk."

Manuel's lifted hands fell in the face of such obvious reasoning. "*Si*," he said. "Ees truth."

"What I want to know," Sheriff Kinsman continued, "is where you got this horse you had in your corral. . . . What do you think, Tipton? Look the same as the animal you saw in town last night?"

Tip studied the blood-bay horse. He got from saddle and walked around the animal and came back to look at the white slash again from the same angle he had seen it pass under the dim corner street lamp.

"Looks the same to me, Sheriff," Harris admitted.

"So!" The sheriff turned again to Oliveras heavily. "So I want to know just how-come I found this horse in your corral. Now I've fooled around enough with you, Manuel. You talk!"

"But, señor!" Manuel Oliveras spread his hands once more. "But twice, ten times, a hundred times I tell you how he comes to me. I find him weeth my own horses on the range. I bring heem home, I care for heem like one of my own poor *caballos*. I t'ink some stranger will come for heem, pay me reward—"

"Quit stalling," the sheriff warned.

"But, señor! Eet is the truth."

Shane was grinning at Manuel. "Sure, it's the truth," Shane said. "Horse belongs to me, Sheriff."

The sheriff suspended his questioning while he shook hands with Shane O'Donnel. "How are you anyhow, Shane?" he said. "Seems like it's been a month of Sundays since we saw that slab-sided, homely mug of yours last. Glad you're home again."

"Me, too."

"About the horse now?"

"That!" Shane laughed. "Just a loco pony I took for a gamblin' debt owed me. Wyoming or maybe it was Colorado—I forget. Pony's never been a bit of use to me since except to carry my blanket roll. Never bothered to keep him hobbled."

"It ain't how you got the horse, Shane. What we're wonderin' is how Tipton here happened to see that animal in town the night of the robbery?"

"Well, I'd stopped early in the afternoon. Down at Sand Springs on Spearhead range," Shane recounted. "You know how it is with a man comin' home after a long while. He wants to look around him, see everything—some of which he's plumb forgot. It was that way with me. After I'd turned the buckskin and that pony loose to graze, I just wandered afoot down across the flats. Just lookin' around me and sort of aimin' to pot a cottontail rabbit for supper if I noticed one."

"What did you notice?"

"Not a thing, Sheriff. Nothin' at all."

"Somebody got that pony," Kinsman stated. "Tipton seen it in town just before the explosion in the bank."

"Sure, the pony was gone next mornin'. I noticed the tracks. I know somebody took him, and it's reasonable sure that man got rid of the pony again quick as the job was finished. The pony strayed across range and joined some of Manuel's stock. That's the only way it can add up."

"That's all you got to say?"

"That's all, Sheriff."

III

DOYLE'S wagon cook packed pots and pans. The wagon pulled out an hour later with the Redondo remuda and the mesa ranchmen and riders following it. The division was complete; these men were solidly behind Jake Doyle. Kinsman had tried to talk to Doyle, and he was still arguing with Bates Tormey at the lone Spearhead wagon when Tip Harris looked back.

Chuck Littlefield summed it up: "Sure, Doyle will go after a maverick tooth and spur like anybody else. But us ranchers who have rode and been neighbors with him know Jake Doyle too well. We know there ain't nothin' halfway about him and whatever he is is right. I'll stand and swear by him till hell freezes over."

"All of which," Dad Osbrook grumbled, "leaves us to handle the mesa roundup ourselves without help."

From there the talk drifted once more into the old familiar pattern of complaint at injustice and wrongs, both real and imagined, suffered from Spearhead in the past. The fact that a good many of these ranchmen were mortgaged to Tom Bannon's bank added heat to the argument. But Tip Harris' mind was not on this. Tip fell to the rear with Shane and watched the blood-bay pony the returned wanderer had claimed trotting along now with the remuda.

"Shane," he said, "that red pony's gentle—gentle as a lamb. You never owned such a horse in your life."

Shane O'Donnel laughed with his head thrown back. "The exception, kid. The one exception that proves the rule, I guess."

"Did you have to prove it at a time like this?"

"He's a good Mexican, Manuel Oliveras is," Shane said. "Helped me out one time. I didn't want to see him get in no serious trouble."

Tip Harris rode on for a while in silence. "You and my Uncle John," he muttered presently. "His trouble was putting too much trust in a man. It's what give Colingo the chance to kill him and the reason Uncle John died as he did."

They were riding up the canyon by this time, the wagon climbing the grade ahead. Dust hung suspended in the hot, still air; the sun poured down its shafts from straight overhead. But Shane's big buckskin hadn't sweated a hair.

"Your Uncle John, had he still been sheriff, wouldn't have let that happen back there," Shane said with a motion of his head. "He fought Tom Bannon and Tom Bannon fought him, but each realized the other's worth. Your Uncle John would have put Tormey straight about that brand on a Spearhead calf."

"You mean how Doyle come to make such a mistake?"

The brim of his hat laid a black line across Shane's face. "It was no mistake," he said. "The man who burned that calf with Doyle's D Bar knew exactly what he was doin'. He knew Doyle had been brandin' some before the roundup started. He took no trouble to drive the cow and her calf apart. It was done a-purpose. The man wasn't Doyle."

"Then who—?"

"I been away too long, Tip. Old quarrels get settled, new ones start. But whoever did it wanted this trouble to break just about the way it has. How good a look did you get at that man on the pony in the dark, kid?"

Harris thought a while. "Not much. His face was low, hid in the pony's mane. But there was something familiar about him, about the way he rode or sat in a saddle. I'm sure of it."

"Was I you," Shane remarked thoughtfully, "I believe I'd just keep that to myself. For a while, at least."

In the early afternoon the wagon topped from the canyon, climbing the last steep bend. North and south the road divided. Doyle and his share of the remuda turned to the right-hand fork. The almost certain results of what had happened that morning

on Skull Creek had begun to sink home and the effect was sobering. Tip pulled his blanket roll and warbag from the wagon, and without bothering to cast a loop Shane caught the gentle red pony. They made a squaw pack for the pony and lashed it down with a lariat.

"Will do for a couple miles," Shane decided, and said so-long to Doyle. "Be over your way soon for a visit, Jake. Tip's stakin' me to bed and grub for a few days."

"For as long as you'll stay," Tip corrected him.

Shane grinned. "You're a good friend, kid."

Good friend, indeed, and reason enough. It had been Shane who had thrown up a foreman's job, ridden a hundred miles and stayed with Tip three months when he needed help after his Uncle John died. Those five or six years ago. No thought of pay, no obligation, no special reason —except "that was ol' Shane." It wasn't the kind of a thing a lank, grief-stricken youngster forgot by the time he was twenty-three.

"All looks just the same. Just like I remember," Shane said. "Like they say, the best part of wanderin' is comin' home, I guess."

EASTWARD the mess rim fell away into space, down and down two thousand feet in broken humps and walls and rough-cut gullies and ravines that for the most part were impassable to a horseman—down to the basin floor below which flattened off, green under the rim and tawny as rust in the distance, fading into the blue heat haze where earth and sky met undistinguishably on the edge of the world. Clearwater town was a cluster of a child's toy blocks below; Spearhead a tiny mound of green cottonwoods beyond. The Corralitos were a savage, spiny necklace dropped upon the land, each sloping hill a bead in its chain and the yonder end lost in the far heat haze.

"Shane, you must have seen a lot of things," Tip said. "Most everything, I reckon."

Shane's hazel eyes looked in on himself and were briefly troubled. "Too much, perhaps."

They drove the half-dozen head of saddle horses that Harris had had in the round-up, all gaunt from the hard month's work past, and the laden red pony before them on the trail from the road. The trail climbed and dipped into farther timber, and rounded into the head of a meadow swale. The two-room cabin and lean-to that Tip's Uncle John had built here between spells of sheriffing stood on the near edge of the meadow, the old logs adzed and squared and dovetailed at the corners and kept well-chinked by Tip. Beyond were corrals and the little barn. Through dooryard to the rail-enclosed garden patch and on to a water trough by the barn ran a tiny crystal-clear stream.

"No man could ask for more," Shane swore solemnly.

"It's what I've always thought," Tip agreed. "But I don't know about a woman, though."

"You say that in a special way, kid. Do I sound too brash if I inquire who the young lady in question is?"

"No. No, I mean it's gone nothin' like so far as that," Harris hurried to explain. "I've only been riding with her a few times. Once we went to a picnic together and again to a dance in town. She's the purtiest thing. But old Tom Bannon never seemed to have much liking for me somehow."

"Ain't it Julia that Bates Tormey aims to marry?"

"I mean Connie. She's the younger sister, Shane."

"Oh." Shane's breath drew in and out between puckered lips, silently. "I ain't seen either since their mother passed away, I guess. That's been some years. You never knew what that old trouble was between your Uncle John and Tom Bannon, Tip?"

"No."

"Both loved the same girl," Shane continued, unsaddling now at the corral. "Tom Bannon finally won her—long before the accident that crippled him, of course—and your Uncle John lost out in the race and never married. But it was always there between him and Tom Bannon, although Bannon backed him twice for sheriff."

They turned the horses free on the meadow grass, bathed away much dust in the clear little stream, loafed and talked the afternoon away. Shane spoke of some

of the things he had seen: bluestem that grew tall as a horse's belly on the Mussel-shell and the vast gash of the Canyon de Chelly in the south; of outfits and men and deeds he had witnessed, his words leavened by the quick humor behind his hazel eyes. They ate supper and sat before the fireplace, yawning comfortably, and finally decided it was time to go to bed.

Shane was taking off his buckskin jumper. He tossed it over a chair and three or four lead-tipped cylinders rolled from the upturned pocket. Tip reached to pick them up.

"Rifle shells? I didn't notice you had a rifle with you, Shane."

"Oh, them!" Shane laughed. "Been carryin' 'em around don't know how long without a gun they'd fit. Man's a good deal like a packrat, son. Throw 'em away for me first thing in the mornin', will you?"

"No, they'll fit that old .30-30 of Uncle John's."

"Good." Shane blew out the lamp and crawled into the other bunk.

Tip Harris lay in the dark, listening to the sound of Shane's almost immediate snoring. The thought came creeping into his brain like a nightmare, unwanted and terrible. First the red pony and a story Kinsman plainly had not believed that morning, now some rifle shells for a gun Shane no longer carried—Tip bit his lips together, pressed fists against his face. He would as soon have believed his Uncle John guilty of allowing the outlaw Colingo to escape that time. Neither was possible. He tore the seed of doubt away and regained his old blind trust in Shane O'Donnel.

He threw the .30-30 shells into a box on the mantel next morning, under his Uncle John's old rifle on the buckhorns above, and called back from the lean-to kitchen's doorway, "I'll rustle in the horses while the stove gets hot, Shane."

None of the horses was to be seen except the blood-bay pony, standing on the edge of the timber with his white-slashed side showing. Tip Harris was about fifty feet from the pony when the rifle lashed at him from the pines. He never heard that single, hard, echoing report. Tip was going down, falling forward on his knees, by the time its noise reached him on the heels of the bullet.

HE dreamed an endless dream that went on hour after hour and held him in a sort of timeless, tossing, suffering agony. It was all mixed up with a blood-bay horse that had a white slash on flank and the fire in the Pronghorn that night, and a rifleman across street in the bell tower, placing his shots so expertly. Once he saw Doc Harmon from town through a burning haze while he rolled and tried to get away.

Doc Harmon said audibly, "Give him another whiff of that ether while I go in after it, Shane. My God, seems like a man who's been everywhere, done everything like you have, could be a little more help to me!"

"How bad is it, Doc?"

"Well, if you'd got into town two-three hours sooner it would have helped greatly. What do you mean you couldn't find a mount?"

The red pony had been waiting there on the edge of the timber. Had somebody led the animal away after that? The pain was a fire-hot poker in Tip's flesh. He dreamed again feverishly. He was burning up, gasping for water, and shivering all over at the same time. He never knew how much time passed. . . . But it was Connie he saw now. Connie as she had been that day at the picnic, her straw-yellow hair in two braids about her up-tilted head. Connie dancing in his arms, her big eyes looking up into him and a small secretive smile on her mouth, while the school-house room in town circled about them, decorated especially for the occasion, and fiddles and a guitar played a waltz. He could hear the tune again.

He said, "I can understand how it must have been mighty tough on my Uncle John, was your mother as purty as you, Connie. But me—reckon I'm right thankful things turned out as they did. Because—"

He heard Shane laughing heartily at him, and Julia speaking quickly afterwards. "He's better today, don't you think so, Connie?" Julia asked.

"Yes." It was Connie's voice. The palm of her hand rested against his.

"It's you? It really is you, Connie?" Tip said.

"Yes. But you mustn't try to talk, Tip."

He fell into dreamless, restful slumber

after that. The shot from the timber had hit him glancingly over the temple and lodged under his collarbone where Doc Harmon had probed out the bullet five days ago. He had suffered concussion and a following fever from the wound. He slept the clock nearly twice around now. Sunlight was streaming through the southerly cabin window and Shane was bending over him when he woke next day, clear-headed.

"How about a little soup?" Shane urged. "Shot a deer in the meadow last evenin'. This is good marrow from the bones."

Tip sucked from the spoon Shane held to his lips. He wished he could get the tangle straightened out in his head.

"The red pony, Shane?" he asked.

"I dunno," Shane said. "Never could find it. The rest of our saddle stock was all down below the rim when I caught up with it."

"The pony was there on the timber's edge when it happened."

Shane's mouth drew tight and he muttered through his teeth, "So that was it! What else did you see?"

"Nothing else."

"Somebody wanted to murder you, Tip. You must know something."

Tip Harris tried to remember. "I can't think what it is."

Hoofs sounded coming across the meadow trail before the soup was finished. Shane was wearing his bone-handled Colt at hip. One hand put the bowl aside and his right dropped and pushed holster forward with a peculiarly lithe and significant motion as he came to his feet. But the tautness left him when Shane reached the window. He turned and grinned back at Harris.

"It's the girls again. And I ain't got you shaved yet."

"I know they were here yesterday," Tip said. "Shane, what all have I been saying, lyin' here out of my head?"

"Plenty." Shane grinned again. "Plenty, kid." And he called from the window, "He's fine this mornin', Connie. Hello, Julia. Both of you come right in."

Connie Bannon came in first, and one look at Tip convinced her of the change. Shane pushed the chair at the bunkside forward and she sat on its edge, slim and golden-haired. She wore a leather riding skirt and the trimmest high-heeled boots Harris had ever seen. But she didn't take his hand, although he had it ready.

"I'm awfully glad you're better, Tip," she said.

From the doorway Julia, her sister, suggested, "Shall we take a walk outside somewhere, Shane?"

"A pleasure," Shane answered gallantly.

Tip Harris heard them leave the steps, walk past the window across the yard. "Connie, what have I been saying these past days?" he asked.

"Oh, I don't know." Her eyes avoided his. Her smile was soft and secretive again. "I don't remember."

"Did I tell you I loved you, Connie?"

She thought that over for a while. "Yes."

"Did I ask you if you'd marry me as soon as I'm well?"

"I didn't pay much attention. You were very sick."

"I meant it, every word of it," he told her. "I want you to know that."

"Oh, Tip!" And suddenly her bright head was down on the bed beside him, her arms clinging tight and frantically to him. Her lips were against his ear. "Oh, Tip!" she said again. "But we can't do anything about it as soon as you'll be ready. I don't want Dad to know yet. He—he's sick, too, Tip. He never will get well."

IV

THE ROUNDUP across the mesa crawled on into the back hills, crept out into that dry, barren country toward Estancia and circled back once more with no help from Spearhead. Bates Tormey had hired the two Cahill boys, both small owners on the Redondo, to represent the Spearhead brand and tally strays. It was not a satisfactory arrangement. On six or eight occasions tracks showed where Tormey or Luke Arberg had taken a crew into some strip of roughs and worked the ground for Spearhead strays ahead of the upland roundup. The cattle were spooky and hard to get after that, and the job to be done all over again to tend to the mesa brands.

Chuck Littlefield and Dad Osbrook's son got into a fist fight with a couple of Spearhead riders in town one night, and Little-

field threatened to gather his friends and sweep Spearhead off the streets the next time he visited Clearwater. Osbrook's boy had been battered so badly he could not work for a week. Twice during that while Sheriff Kinsman rode up to talk with Harris.

"I'd let the bank robbery go and gladly forget it," the sheriff remarked, "if I could only get this other thing straightened out. The feeling is growing worse between Spearhead and the Redondo all the time. There's talk it was somebody from Spearhead who tried to kill you, Tipton."

"That's nonsense," Tip said.

The sheriff nodded. "But if one more shot gets fired somehow, it will mean war here. Things are that bad. Bannon knows it. He's give Tormey his strict orders and done everything else in the power of a bedridden man to stop it. Both sides will lose if it comes. Bloodshed and violence leave their mark which never can be erased again—not in the lifetime we live. For Tom Bannon that ain't much longer now. He's asked me to talk to you, Tipton."

"About what?"

"It takes Spearhead influence and backing to put a sheriff in office in this county and keep him there. That's the plain truth, and the Redondo figures I'm Tom Bannon's man," the sheriff said. "But it wasn't that way with your Uncle John. Between him and Bannon no love was lost. Your uncle built this cabin here and run stock on the mesa. Bannon suggests I make you my first deputy, Tipton."

Tip stared; his mouth opened. But he didn't say anything.

"It ain't a job you want, I reckon," Sheriff Kinsman continued. "But think it over, son. You come from the Redondo with your Uncle John's name behind you. With you in the sheriff's office with me, nobody could think I didn't aim to measure out justice impartial. That might help more than either of us can now see. Well, like I say, think it over. And another thing."

"What's that?"

Kinsman was climbing back on his horse in the dooryard. "Shane. If you've got any influence with him, keep Shane away from Spearhead. He's been seeing too much of Julia Bannon lately."

"She's not married to Bates Tormey yet."

"I know, I know," the sheriff muttered. "But it's got Tormey crazy-mad."

More than a month had passed since the day an unknown killer had fired on Tip Harris from the timber's edge. He cooked for himself, did the usual chores about the place and rode a bit, still careful of his shoulder as Doc Harmon had ordered. He was gaining back some of the flesh he had lost and the slash over his temple had healed into a white scar. Shane still came by every day or two and often stayed overnight; but after his years of wandering Shane O'Donnel had developed a new interest in his old shack and a section of land on Halfway Creek.

A week had gone by after that last talk with Kinsman before Tip saw Connie Bannon again. She came riding up to the rim one morning then, and told him her father wanted to see him.

"What have you told him—anything about us, Connie?" Tip Harris wanted to know.

"No, not yet," she answered. "I couldn't bear to quarrel with him now, Tip, if—if he didn't approve. I don't want to to be like that."

BANNON sat propped up on a bed that had been carried into his office room at Spearhead. Once he had been a powerful man physically and that still showed on him, in the rugged width of his shoulders and his big gnarled hands. But only the bones and the big frame of him were left. His eyes, flinty hard and still steady, had sunken into the sockets; his hair in the six or eight months of time since Harris had last seen him riding on the range in his carriage had turned snow white. His voice was no more than an echo, husky and hollow, from the shell of the man he had once been.

"Sit down, Harris," he commanded. "I understand that Kinsman has spoken to you."

"About the deputy job, yes," Tip said.

In one corner of the room was Bannon's old roll-top desk at which he had schemed and labored and plotted the moves that had built Spearhead. The desk was closed. On the floor under Harris' feet was an old and faded Navajo rug that Tom Ban-

non's boots had once paced with long strides when he came from the saddle. But ten years had passed since Bannon had last walked or mounted one of his horses. On the walls were a dozen branding irons, representing as many outfits which had gone into the making of Spearhead.

"You look a good deal like your uncle," Bannon continued. "The same chin and mouth. He was never a man I liked personally. But he was capable."

"And that's the way you feel about me, sir?"

"That," said Bannon, "I do not yet know. My daughter Connie has spoken of you often lately. I have seen very little of you myself. What is your decision about the deputy job Sheriff Kinsman has offered you?"

"I'm not a Spearhead man," Harris said. "I will never take my orders from Spearhead."

An ironic, bitter smile moved across Bannon's lips. "Spoken as your Uncle John would have said it," he remarked, and nodded. "That is understood."

The door through which Connie had showed him into her father's office broke open behind Tip's back and Bates Tormey came storming into the room suddenly. His high-nosed, handsome face was flushed; saddle dust still clung to the seams of his clothing and his spurs raked across the old rug.

"You can't do it, Bannon," Tormey said. "I've got a say in what goes on here at Spearhead now. Luke Arberg is the man to put into the sheriff's office as head deputy, and there's never been any question about it. I'm telling you—"

Bannon's sunken eyes stared at him. "You're telling me nothing, Bates. When I want your advice I will ask for it."

"I've got money in the brand," Tormey shouted. "Don't forget that! It's different than it was before. I've got a right to make my demand and see that it's carried out."

Bannon raised himself; some breath of the old power came back into his lungs. "I'm still running Spearhead, Bates," he roared. The effort of it sank him back again to the pillows. His voice was almost a whisper as he turned his head at last, and asked, "What is your decision, Harris? Pay no attention to this interruption."

Tip Harris said, "I will take the job."

Julia was standing on the porch outside when he left the room. Some subtle change had taken hold of her; Tip had noticed it before. Her dark hair was drawn smoothly back and her pretty face had a new radiance, despite the sadness in this house; and it was a look, he knew, that Shane O'Donnel had put there. The girl's left hand rested on the porch rail at her side and the third finger was bare. Julia no longer wore Tormey's ring.

THE night, of the day Sheriff Ross Kinsman swore Harris in as first deputy, Tom Bannon died quietly in his bed. Bannon's illness had been long and the whole country had known this was coming. On horseback and by buckboard and wagons men who had been his friends —and also his enemies, who respected him —traveled a good many miles to stand in the shade of the old Spearhead cottonwoods and listen to the service and finally follow Tom Bannon's coffin to the grave on a point of land overlooking Clearwater Creek where he had wanted to be buried.

It marked the passing of an oldtimer—stanch friend, hard enemy—and also a way of life. No other man in the community was likely to duplicate what Tom Bannon had accomplished in the span of his years; and the best that could be hoped for now was that Bates Tormey or some other manager would prove himself able to make peace again with the Redondo and hold the big brand together in the face of changing conditions. Few realized the extent of Tormey's ambition.

Three days after the funeral Sheriff Kinsman arrested Shane O'Donnel for the bank robbery on evidence Tormey furnished him. The evidence as well as Tormey's sworn statement Sheriff Kinsman placed in his office safe. Knowing the way Tip Harris and the rest of the Redondo cowmen felt about Shane, the sheriff got rid of his deputy by sending him on a mission into the Corralitos with some papers to serve.

It was dark before Kinsman finally located the man he sought at Wagon Ford on the Estancia road. Shane and Chuck Littlefield had dropped down from the rim for a few hours sociability at the roadhouse that evening. While Kinsman was tying

his mount to the rail outside, Luke Arberg and Tate Mounts and young Link Scott came drifting along the road and also stopped. It was in the sheriff's power to order the three Spearhead men on without their drink, but Kinsman did not do so.

Arberg and Mounts, leaving their horses beside the sheriff's, were about ten paces behind him when Kinsman entered the saloon doorway. Wagon Ford had nothing to offer except that saloon, an eating house of sorts and a shabby wayfarers' hotel. Shane was sitting across from Duke Corliss, a gambler, at a rear table with Chuck Littlefield on his right facing the doorway. Stakes and chips that did not amount to more than three or four dollars were on the table, and it was plainly a friendly game.

Abe Jackson, a prospector, was sitting astraddle a chair with his elbows hooked across its back, idly watching the play. Shane had just called his order to the barkeep for beers all around when he saw Kinsman coming in from the night and included him.

"Set out another glass for the sheriff," he called. "Hello, Ross."

Ross Kinsman came on across the room without replying to the greeting and stopped. "Sorry to break up the party," he said. "But I've got a warrant for you, Shane. I'm putting you under arrest for the bank robbery at Clearwater that night."

Shane stared at him. At Shane's right Chuck Littlefield started up, eyes on the doorway which Luke Arberg and Mounts had just entered with young Scott behind them. Mounts had been one of the Spearhead riders in the knock-down fight Littlefield and the Osbrook boy had had.

"What kind of a frame-up is this?" Littlefield yelled. He dropped the cards in his hand.

Duke Corliss, the gambler, pushed himself backward violently, toppling over the chair under him, and dropped to the floor. Arberg swore later that he had seen Littlefield going for his gun before the first shot was fired. That shot hit Sheriff Kinsman in the side of his chest, staggered him against the card table and the sheriff fell. The table toppled over with a crash. Littlefield was shooting then. Arberg had jumped sidewise for cover at the end of the bar, firing along it. Tate Mounts swung half-around, trying to reach the doorway. Mounts' legs failed and buckled under him at the joints, and he lost his gun. Link Scott caught him and dragged him backward through the door.

Shane O'Donnel was standing backed against the rear wall of the saloon by that time, firing against Arberg. Littlefield was wounded, half-blinded, clutching his side with one hand and shooting with the other. Shane worked along the back wall, pushing Littlefield ahead. The place was fogged with gunsmoke. Abe Jackson, the prospector, had cover behind a stack of empty cases where he crouched. The barkeep, who had taken no hand in the battle, lay stretched out on the sawdust behind his bar, killed by a stray bullet between his brows.

Supporting Littlefield with a shoulder under one armpit, Shane kicked a rear door open and the two of them stumbled out. Luke Arberg did not try to follow, and after a time horses left the wagon corrals behind and moved off at a run into the darkness of the night.

V

WORD reached Tip at his room in the old St. George Hotel around two o'clock in the morning. Harris had returned from his errand to the Corralitos in the early evening and lingered at the sheriff's office in the rear of the courthouse till nearly eleven, worried by Kinsman's absence and the lack of any explanation for it. It was the gambler, Duke Corliss, who woke him hammering on the door of his hotel room, and told Harris what had happened.

Kinsman had been killed with his gun in hand, but no shot fired from barrel. Littlefield, Corliss thought, was badly wounded; Tate Mounts had been alive when the gambler left Wagon Ford, but was dying. The innocent barkeep had fallen like a pole-axed ox with a chance bullet in his brain.

"Who did fire the first shot?" Harris asked.

"It's God's truth, I don't know," Corliss said. "Littlefield had jumped up from the table. He opened his hand and his cards fell like he was goin' for a gun. I shoved myself backward in my chair to get out

of the path of trouble then. It was all over and finished in twenty seconds. But while it lasted there was hell in that room."

Tip Harris sat on the edge of his hotel bed, pulling on his boots. There was a cold numbness in him; his hands were clammy and clumsy. He kept swallowing back something that rose into his throat, and his own voice didn't sound right to his ears.

"You say Kinsman had told Shane he was under arrest for the bank robbery?"

"That's the way I heard it," Corliss answered. "But you ought to know about that. You been helpin' Kinsman. He swore you in as his deputy, didn't he?"

"Yes," Harris said.

The deputy star was pinned there to the pocket flap of the shirt he had slipped on. He stared down at it. Except for that star, Shane would have come to him first of all for help, he thought—help such as Shane had given him when his Uncle John died and again when a killer's bullet struck from the timber's edge, help without stint or question. Shane hadn't asked any questions about duty. Harris wanted to rip that star away and get it out of his sight forever, and at the same time he knew that could in no way solve the problem.

"Come along," he said instead.

The gambler walked beside him to the corner across from the bank, past the front of the courthouse with its wooden bell tower showing hazily against the night. Tip thought of the rifleman in the bell tower that night, directing his shots into the street with a reckless disregard for his own safety and an astonishing accuracy. Shane—had it been Shane in the tower? They turned in through the yards to the sheriff's office in the rear of the building and Harris lighted the lamp within.

He looked over Kinsman's papers on the desk and found nothing there. It was past three in the morning when at last he unearthed a slip of paper hidden in the bottom of a drawer, and from it learned the combination of the safe.

"Sheriff didn't trust you much, seems like," Corliss remarked.

Harris didn't answer. It was all there in the safe—half a dozen stock certificates in the Stanton Mining Company which the bank had held and financed, and Bates Tormey's written statement. Tormey said that he had been suspicious of Shane O'Donnel from the start. So he had started watching Shane, particularly after the returned wanderer had begun fixing up his own dilapidated shack on Halfway Creek. He had noticed Shane carrying a shovel into the shack which was a queer place to be digging and, biding his time, had later searched the interior.

Old floor boards had been lifted, Tormey stated. He had found the spot by a sprinkling of earth on the boards above. In the cache that Shane had dug under the floor, he had found the certificates of stock in the Stanton Mining Company and disturbed nothing else, for fear Shane might take warning and run before the law could act. But the stock certificates alone were sufficient. The Clearwater Bank had financed the Stanton Mine with capital of its own, and held the only stock outside the company itself.

Such certificates had formed no part of the estimated $30,000 looted from the bank. The certificates were too hot to handle now or any time. But the only place they could have come from was the dynamited bank vault.

Tip put the evidence back in the sheriff's little office safe and kept the slip that had the combination written on it in his pocket. He sat down in Kinsman's old swivel chair, stared at the room and the lighted lamp with a torn and haggard look on his face. This was the office his Uncle John had once occupied. There on the wall was an old dusty photograph of his uncle on horseback, surrounded by six or eight possemen. Near the rear of the room stood the gun-rack that had armed the men who had captured Colingo that time. It had been from that rack also that the outlaw had managed to grab a weapon and make his escape to the street again, killing John Harris who stood in the way.

These were the things Tip saw about him in the lamplight, while he thought of Shane. The long ride of yesterday into the Corralitos still laid a heavy load of weariness on him, since he hadn't yet recovered anything like his old hard-muscled strength. It lasted so long that Corliss, the tinhorn gambler from Wagon Ford, felt a sort of pity for him, not realizing the half of it.

"Look, Harris! You got to do something," he said.

Tip had forgotten him entirely and started at the sound of the gambler's voice. He got very slowly up to his feet again. "Who did see who fired that first shot at Kinsman?" he asked.

"I don't even know it was the first shot fired that hit Kinsman," Corliss corrected. "But maybe Luke Arberg seen it. Him or old Abe Jackson, the prospector, or maybe young Link Scott."

"It's all a trumped-up plot against Shane O'Donnel," Harris declared. "I know because I know Shane. If he'd drawn against Kinsman, he'd have given him a fair chance. Kinsman would have been shot facing him, not in the side of the chest."

"Anything can happen in a mix-up like that."

"That's the way it was intended," Deputy Harris said, and he had his thought then of Connie Bannon, whom he had not seen since her father's death. What he was saying now hit directly at Spearhead. "Kinsman was used and the whole thing framed-up like that against Shane and the Redondo. That's what I know, and that's the way I've got to play it."

At four in the morning Spearhead arrived in town.

RIDERS came clattering in past the courthouse, swerved at the corner and brought their mounts to a halt outside the sheriff's office in the rear. There were ten men from Spearhead in the party, all freshly mounted at the ranch and well-armed. Tormey was the first inside with Arberg right behind him. The rest of the hands crowded into the room and stood jammed up in the doorway.

"Wasn't sure we'd find you here, Harris," Tormey said with the implication that he personally was surprised Tip hadn't already run for the rim. He stared at Corliss for a moment as though the gambler's presence was not entirely welcome.

"Well, you've found me," Tip said. "So what?"

Tormey shook his head. "Know the way you must feel about it, Harris," Tormey continued with a kind of smirking sympathy in his voice. "Shane O'Donnel nursed you back on your feet from that gunshot wound; we all know what kind of a friend he was to you. Nobody will expect you to head the posse that takes after him for the murder of Kinsman. It ain't as though you've had any experience anyhow. Arberg will take over."

"No," Tip said. "Arberg won't take over."

"What d'you mean by that?" The lids drooped over Tormey's eyes so that nothing could be seen of their depths. He stiffened.

Harris said, "In the first place, I mean Shane didn't fire the shot that killed Sheriff Kinsman."

"Listen! Don't be a fool," Tormey yelled. "Arberg was there. He saw it. You weren't nowhere within a dozen miles." He wheeled on Corliss suddenly. "What has this tinhorn been sayin'?"

Corliss shrugged. "Don't drag me into it. All I've said was that I didn't see it. I brought word into town, that's all."

"How long ago?"

"Couple hours, I guess."

"There's proof right here in Kinsman's safe."

Harris nodded. "I've seen it and locked it up again for keeps. It will go to a jury just the way it lies there now in the safe."

Tormey thought this over, and shouted, "I tell you Arberg was a witness. Explain it to him, Luke."

Luke Arberg cleared his husky throat. "Well, me and Tate Mounts was right behind the sheriff when he stepped into that saloon tonight. We heard Kinsman say he was arresting Shane for the bank job. Littlefield was there at the table. Littlefield jumped up and started to draw, but Shane was faster. Shane fired at Kinsman from about two yards away. Couldn't miss. Then the gunfight started with Ttate and me backin' up the sheriff's play."

Harris didn't say anything in the following silence.

"You've heard the way it happened," Tormey snapped.

"I've heard the way Luke Arberg says it happened," Harris admitted.

Tormey stared at him with his eyes half-closed. "A smart man, Harris, would know on which side his bread was buttered," Tormey said. "He'd know that with Spearhead behind him, he could be elected the next sheriff to fill Kinsman's

boots. It's a good job with a fair salary and time enough on the side to look after your little cow ranch on the rim, just like your uncle did. You could hand over what little authority you got now to Arberg and let him tend to this dirty task ahead and still win out. That's what I'm tellin' you."

"You're offering me the chance to ride on Spearhead's side in the range war that has been ignited with gunsmoke tonight?"

"The Redondo can't win it."

"I'm not for hire, Tormey."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going after Shane," Harris said. "And bring him back for trial when I find him. Because I believe he's innocent."

Tormey turned on his bootheels and started toward the door with his stiff stride, his men moving with him. In the doorway he stopped and wheeled about.

"Kinsman himself couldn't have lasted without the brand behind him," he said, choked fury in his voice. "You've got nothing at all to stand on. There's no longer any law in this county. It's every man and outfit for himself. But you could have rode along with Spearhead, remember that."

Tormey tramped on out with his men behind him. Only Corliss, the gambler from Wagon Ford, was left, shifting his weight from one uneasy foot to the other in his hurry to be gone.

"Reckon I'd better be on my way," he mumbled. "Got some business to attend to out at Estancia."

"When you go by the stable, ask the hostler to saddle my horse," Harris said.

Some obscure impulse moved Corliss, perhaps that pity he had felt before. "Why don't you come along with me," he urged. "Estancia is as good a way to ride as another. The Redondo will be too busy to back you if it would. What else can you do?"

"Find Shane," Harris answered.

HE DID NOT by any chance expect to find Shane at the shack on Halfway Creek. A trample of hoofprints in the dooryard showed many riders had already been here and left again. Floor boards at one end of the shack's front room had been torn away, disclosing a hole dug in the ground below and an old tin trunk buried there, empty now with its lid pried off. Except for this letter, Shane's labor of past days had fixed the place up neat and tidy again. Harris noticed that.

Littlefield lay on the bunk in the rear room, blood on the floor beside him and his boots pulled off. Tip Harris could remember Chuck Littlefield saying more than once, half seriously, half in jest, that when his time came he hoped it wouldn't happen out on the lonely range somewhere, the way most accidents did. He wasn't one of those hell-for-leather, rip-roaring fellows, he said. He wanted it comfortable in a bed in about fifty years, before he got too feeble, with his boots pulled off and a pillow at his head and a friend beside him. Shane had not forgotten.

Shane had been powerless to extend the years. But somehow he had got Littlefield this far, carried him in, and the butts of many cigarettes on the floor beside the bunk showed Shane had stayed with him till the end. That must have been past daybreak; the stub of a candle stuck on the table had been blown out as though light were no longer needed when Shane finally rode. It was like Shane O'Donnel to have forfeited precious hours that would have carried him miles away to satisfy the once-expressed whim of a man doomed beyond any help as he lay here.

A fly buzzed noisily about the room. Harris took what was left of a sheet that had been partly used for bandages and covered Littlefield. He knew he was being watched when he stepped from the shack. A horse stamped in the distance and he saw a flick of white, and after a moment the animal standing on the edge of a thicket.

It was Jake Doyle who trotted from the thicket on a white-stockinged gelding with two riders behind him as Harris climbed the slope. Doyle's face was ugly; he was carrying a carbine across bow of his saddle. He was never a man who did things by halves.

"Find what you was lookin' for down there?" he asked. He stopped the gelding so that the carbine's muzzle was on the side toward Tip. This man would have been glad to fight now or anytime for Shane.

Harris said, "Will you do what's left to be done for Chuck Littlefield, Jake?"

A stubble of beard showed on Doyle's

protruding chin; his eyes were bloodshot and red-rimmed from dust. He nodded. "I will."

Harris started his horse away.

Doyle let him ride on ten yards before he raised his voice. "But the next time you come up here on the rim," Doyle called, "either throw away that deputy star you're wearin' or come prepared to fight. You can't straddle the fence in a thing like this. Pick your side!"

Harris stopped and swung his horse around, anger surging through him. But there wasn't anything he could say. Doyle meant it, every word of it. Everything was either one way or the other to Jake Doyle. Harris clenched his jaws together to keep from answering, and rode on up the ridge. He wasted three hours trying to find the buckskin's track among the maze of fresh hoofprints that covered the rim country this morning.

He needed a fresh horse under saddle, not this lagging livery stable mount that had carried him on that long ride into the Corralitos yesterday. Thought of the Corralitos brought back to his mind the talk he had had with Doyle the night following the robbery, before it was known Shane had returned. He had told Doyle then that he believed a smart man would head south into the hill ranges or cut out across Spearhead for a getaway, and he still thought that way. He drifted now along the rim, dropped into his own little meadow valley around noontime. He roped a fresh mount from among his own horses, and stopped by the cabin.

The old rifle that had belonged to his Uncle John was missing from the buckhorns over the mantelpiece. Pinned under a corner of the box which had held shells for the gun, empty now, he found Shane O'Donnel's note:

"Needed the .30-30. So-long, kid."

Harris picked up the buckskin's track by the corral, plain in the soft earth. From there Shane's trail led out on the rim into the brush and rocks and down among the sheer-edged draws and ravine through which as Jake Doyle had once remarked only Shane O'Donnel could travel with a horse. Tip did not try to track it out, for that would have been a useless waste of time. He knew without looking that Shane was taking care to leave no trail here that could be followed. But Shane was heading south.

VI

HE found a dry-land squatter in the Corralitos who had seen a buckskin and rider about a mile away the day before. That rider had been heading south among the rough hill crests and ridges, traveling fast. The squatter had turned his own runty pony up the slope, intending to meet and pass the time of day with the man. But the rider on the buckskin had seen him first and cut off the other way around the point of a ridge and disappeared after that.

"Big leggy horse," Tip said. "Takes a stride that measures six-eight inches longer than most. That kind of track?"

"That's right," the squatter replied, and wiped tobacco juice from the ends of his scraggly mustache. "Where you from—Clearwater? What's happenin' up in that country anyhow?"

Harris said, "I don't know."

For three days he followed the long-striding tracks, losing them for hours at a time, judging the country ahead and the way a fugitive would probably move through it and finding the trail once more beyond. His own horse was spent. He located a ranch that afternoon and traded for a fresh mount, giving the ranchman twenty dollars to boot. He knew the rider he followed had finally turned on him and cut back to the north. He could not stop and rest now, not even long enough for a meal. He was back among the edge hills that night, following a long serrated ridge by starlight, when some vague shifting of the wind brought the plain odor of woodsmoke to his nostrils.

No point of light or flicker of fire flames showed in the night. He tested the breeze with a wet finger and worked down the broken slope against it. He lost the smoke smell and circled back, and suddenly a horse neighed shrilly in the close darkness. The fire was hidden in a rocky slot. A rider came up from his blanket in the light, clutching a rusty rifle.

"Keep away from me," he screamed. "Don't try to touch that horse or I'll kill you, whoever you are!"

Tip felt a hopeless weariness rise and engulf him. He slowly got down from the

saddle. The man in the firelight was a youngster with a pointed, frightened face, no more than eighteen or nineteen years of age. Not Shane.

"I don't want your horse," Harris told him. "My mistake. But have you got anything at all to eat?"

The youngster added fuel to the blaze. He measured a handful of coffee into a battered tin can that served for a pot. The horse standing on the end of its tether was a creamy sorrel with a light mane and tail, easily enough mistaken for a buckskin at any distance.

"Nobody's ever goin' to take that horse from me," the youngster argued in a bitter voice. "He's mine, I tell you! The man that owned him didn't treat him right. That man didn't treat me right neither. He owed me three months back wages. It's enough to pay for any horse—no matter how I took him. Ain't it enough?"

"Reckon so. My mistake," Tip repeated wearily.

They slept together under the single ragged blanket that night, deputy and horsethief.

Harris was down on the edge of the Reservation now, across the county line and far beyond the limits of Spearhead's grass. But the rumble of range war along the rim had already reached this far. He talked to a teamster freighting supplies south. Manuel Oliveras, who for twenty years had squatted on land he didn't own, had been driven off and his shanty burned, not that Bates Tormey desired to annex so poor any tiny a parcel of range to Spearhead, but because now it served as a stepping stone to the rim above. In retaliation Redondo riders shelled Spearhead's west line camp and dynamited the good spring there. Tormey was hiring gunmen at double wages, importing a picked hard-eyed crew from Estancia and out beyond. Clearwater town had sent an appeal to the governor.

"Kinsman's deputy has disappeared," the teamster added. "Some say he was a friend of Shane's, others claim he's run."

A WEEK had passed. Harris rode across into the Reservation next morning, passing sentries on the road. Cavalry was quartered at the agency, patrolling boundary lines after some new flare-up of trouble between marauding tribesman and ranchers in the vicinity who had lost both horses and cattle—an old trouble, smouldering along for years, and never solved.

"No. Nobody's come across this way," the agent told Harris. "Troopers ride the line every day, follow any fresh track. No chance at all. But you're a long way outside your own district."

Tip knew he had lost. Too much time had passed. He could see Connie's face in the still heat haze as he turned back; he had gambled everything on this one play and how much he had lost now Harris could not measure. He was thirty-some miles on his way back to Clearwater by sundown. Ahead, he saw a little smoke. He rode into a prosepctor's camp among the gullies just as it was growing dark.

Two burros foraged on the nearby slope. The man squatted over his cooking fire raised a bony head from which his white hair bristled like a cock's comb. His neck was long and wrinkled, and his old gaunt arms flapped loosely inside a denim jumper that was at least three sizes too large for him.

"Howdy, Harris," he mumbled. "Git down an' rest yore saddle."

No surprise in his voice, just the ordinary invitation. Two or three times each year Abe Jackson journeyed to Estancia to buy his supplies wholesale, dallying on the road a bit to renew his contact with the outside world; and the rest of his days were spent no man knew where with his burros and his pick and gold pan. Some said he prospected inside the Reservation which was forbidden and would leave his white comb there one day, drying, hidden and also forbidden on a teepee pole. But it hadn't happened yet. Something like hope began to grow bright in Tip Harris' eyes.

"Sure like to, Abe," he accepted, climbing from his horse. "How's everything?"

"Wal, toler'ble. Can't complain, except fer this rheumatiz in my left knee. Allus worse after a trip to Estancia."

"That's all the bad whiskey you drink."

"Like enough." The old man cackled softly to himself. "Like enough yo're right."

"Take that night at Wagon Ford," Tip began. "I hear you was so pie-eyed you didn't see nothin' that took place. The first

shot musta been fired right under your nose at that."

"Didn't miss me by three inches," Abe Jackson said.

"Now just how was you sittin' in relation to the card table and Shane at the time?"

The old man shook his head. "Forgit it, Tipton. I know whut you want me to say. Won't do no good. I seen Tom Bannon carve out most of Spearhead's range. Nothin' ever stood ag'in him. Tormey ain't near the man Tom Bannon was, but then he's got more to start with. You can't help Shane."

"Abe, he didn't fire that shot!"

"I ain't sayin' he did, or thet he didn't. It don't make no difference. Shane is plumb finished, either way. Don't dig into it no deeper'n thet."

"I got to, Abe."

"Supper's ready," the old prospector growled. "Come an' git it 'fore I throw it away."

They ate sitting on the burros' packloads beside the fire. Harris washed the dishes afterwards and scoured them with sand.

"It's this way, Abe," he said. "If you won't talk willingly, I reckon it's in my power to take you back as a witness and make you talk before a jury or get jailed for contempt."

"You'll regret it to your dyin' day if you do, Tipton."

"What d'you mean by that?"

"Forgit it, I tell you!" the old man snapped. "I don't know nothin'. Time to go to bed."

They slept. The horse came moving softly into their camp just as it was growing light. Tip heard a shod hoof click on rock in the distance and kept his head buried down in the blankets while the horseman circled the camp twice, too far away to be easily identified in the gray half-light. Abe Jackson snored steadily.

"Hey, Abe!" a cautious voice called. "Abe, you there? Wake up." Tip recognized the voice immediately.

Jackson woke. "Yeh! Who is it?"

"Me, Link Scott. Remember? Been lookin' all over the country for you. Tormey's got a message he wants me to give you." Link was getting from his horse.

The old prospector said, "I ain't got nothin' to do with Bates Tormey. Take his message back to him an' tell him so."

"You'll change your mind," Link answered confidently. "All Tormey wants is for you to head back into the hills quick and disappear like you always do. Stay there till this trouble blows over. I been searchin' all across the Corralitos for you, Bates sent some money . . . Hey, who's that with you there?"

Link stared. He turned and started running back for his horse. Harris was on him like a cat. He made a racing dive and caught Link just above the knees. They went down in a heap together. Link clawed at him. They were about of an even size and more than once had wrestled it out in a friendly fashion about some roundup camp. This wasn't for fun.

Link slugged, crawling free. Tip hit him in the mouth. Link fell again and his hand went back under him, dragging at his holstered gun. Tip kicked and brought one foot up under Link's chin. Link's head snapped back on his neck and he lost the gun. He let out a hollow groan. Tip jumped on him with both stockinged feet; there hadn't been time to pull on his boots. He threw Link's gun off into the brush.

Link rolled over groggily on his stomach. Harris waited for him to get up. Link just lay there, suffering.

"How much money did Tormey give you to bribe old Abe to disappear?" Harris asked.

"Five hundred," Link moaned.

"Five hundred dollars! How much for yourself, to say you hadn't seen what happened in that saloon?"

"The same."

"By God, you're going to talk, Link! Which was it, Arberg or Tate Mounts who fired that first shot from the doorway and hit Kinsman?"

"Arberg," Link groaned. "But it was an accident. Arberg was only tryin' to stop Littlefield. Nobody wanted to kill Kinsman."

"They wanted Shane!"

"I guess that's right."

Tip stood and looked down at the Spearhead rider with whom he had covered a good many miles in roundups of the past when all the outfits worked together, and those times seemed a long way off, as far as the distant miles. His mouth was a

slit across his face; the scar over his temple was livid with the anger in his veins. Abe Jackson came up, shivering in the morning chill.

"You heard him, Abe," Harris said. "Was that the way it was?"

The old man nodded his white cock's comb mutely, as though he hated to favor this new development with even one single word.

"All right," Tip said. "I've got to trust you, Abe. There's Link's gun over in the brush. I'm giving you a legally appointed deputy's orders to take charge and deliver both Link Scott and yourself to Clearwater for an investigation before a court as soon as you can get there. You understand me, Abe?"

"You'll regret it," the old man muttered. "I've warned you not to dig no deeper into it."

"All same, be there. This means I somehow got to bring in Shane O'Donnel."

Link raised himself on his elbows. "You'll never take him out of there."

"Out of where?" Harris said, and suddenly he knew the answer. . . .

IT had been plain all the while. The buckskin's trail leading off into the roughs below the rim, heading south; the maze of tracks across the upper country that morning and Doyle's presence at Shane's old shack, even Doyle's spoken words—all meant just one thing. Shane O'Donnel had not run south or anywhere else; he had never left the rim.

Tip Harris lay on the ridge above, the morning of the day after he had left the prospector's camp, and looked down on the roof of Doyle's squat log cabin, the barn and sheds beside a swift-flowing stream and the strip of fenced pasture where many tough, hard-ridden horses grazed.

Morning shadow still filled the rim-top valley, and a paling square of lamplight outlined a kitchen window. Smoke rose from a stovepipe chimney in a thin straight column into the quiet air. He watched a man coming down through farther timber now from the rocky notch beyond, carrying a rifle hooked under one arm. A triangle under the ranch house eaves rang stridently and a woman's white apron flapped in the kitchen doorway for a moment. Another rifleman came riding in across the meadow.

Several riders were waiting in the dooryard before the two guards reached the house. One took the saddled horse and rode back into the pasture, and began driving the stock there toward the corral. It was all a familiar sight to Harris; Doyle's ranch was always headquarters when the roundup reached the mess and he had eaten in that kitchen many times. But now that the belated roundup this year was finally finished, still half the Redondo lingered in force at Jake Doyle's. There was only the one road through the gap. This ranch could be defended like a fortress.

The main party of riders took off along the road from the corrals at sunup. Two horsemen, left behind, came leisurely quartering up the slope where Harris lay and watched. But he knew the trail they were following, and he knew he had left no fresh sign on it. He had his horse's head tied down in a thicket over the ridge crest and that didn't worry him. He was certain as fate that he was right this time.

Half an hour later he watched the figure of a woman—one of Doyle's grown daughters—leave the kitchen doorway and cross yards to the barn with a basket in hand. She disappeared inside the barn for three or four minutes and walked back to the house without the basket. Tip had already decided one of the horseman who climbed this way was on lookout at the end of the ridge. The second man would be guarding the farther opening of the creek. Undoubtedly others held the main road.

Harris moved along the ridge, keeping in shadow of the thickets. Early sunlight was just slanting into the top valley. He dropped into a gully that cut down the face of the slope, and had to claw his way through the brush. He came out beside the stream that ran back of the barn. He waded across, ducked into shelter under the creek's bank and followed it till the bulk of the barn stood between him and the house. He scrambled up the bank and walked without hurry across the open to the rear wall of the barn. There was no door in this side. He climbed over the sill of a window hole and let himself down inside.

There were a couple of horses tied in stalls at the front end of the barn. Harris cat-footed along close to the wall. He

heard an animal stamping restlessly from the rear of the barn somewhere, and turned. Shane's big buckskin stood in a high-sided box stall back there. The animal's ears flattened at the sight of Harris and he kicked at the planks of the stall.

"Barney, stop it!" Shane's voice came down from the mow above, and the big horse quieted.

Tip climbed the rungs of a ladder to the mow. The instant his head came through the opening above he saw Shane sitting there, finishing his breakfast from the basket. Shane had his back propped up against mow hay with one bandaged leg thrust out before him. His bone-handled Colt lay on the mow floor beside him and the old .30-30 rifle leaned against the hay.

"Shane," Tip said quietly.

Shane's hand went for the six-gun with an instant swiftness that snapped up the gun and brought its muzzle around to cover Tip as his head turned. The breath came out of Shane's lungs with a soft grunt then, and he grinned through the stubble of beard on his face.

"Well, kid. Reckon you wouldn't be your Uncle John's nephew if you hadn't found me," he said. "What's been goin' on in Clearwater town anyhow?"

"I wouldn't know," Tip said. He climbed out on the floor of the mow. "Ain't been in town."

"Tormey first brought cattle in on Manuel Oliveras' ground," Shane told him. "Yesterday he moved more Spearhead stock up over the edge onto Littlefield's old range. He's already got a big force of men holdin' that side of the rim, enough to keep his cattle there. He's playin' politics in town, stalling for time till he can get Luke Arberg appointed sheriff. Maybe that's already happened. The Redondo is going to lose this fight, Tip. Didn't Tormey offer you a chance to tie in with him?"

"He made me that sort of offer," Tip said.

"And there's Connie, too. From what's been learned about Tom Bannon's will, he left Tormey in full control of the ranch. The two girls have nothing to say in what he does. Tormey also owns a share in the brand that he bought outright, a month or six weeks before Bannon's death. It's one hell of a mix-up, ain't it, son?"

"It's all of that," Tip said. "But I've got one part of it straightened out, Shane. It wasn't your shot that killed Ross Kinsman and started the gunfight at Wagon Ford that night. I've lined up Abe Jackson and Link Scott for witnesses. I'm going to clear you, Shane."

"And that's why you're here?"

"That's why I'm here—to take you back with me, Shane."

SHANE O'DONNEL shook his head. "You never thought—" He looked away and his mouth twisted under the stubble of beard, and he began again, "Kid, you never thought maybe I might be guilty?"

"I tell you I got two witnesses, Shane."

"I don't mean that." Shane shook his head again, and swore tonelessly under his breath. "There ain't no use tryin' to beat about the bush. It was Tormey and Arberg and me that robbed the bank that night. That's the plain truth, Tip."

Harris stared at him, and understood then that this was what Abe Jackson had suspicioned or known all the while. This was what the old prospector had tried to keep him from unearthing.

"Tormey had keys to let us into the bank," Shane continued in the same slow, dead-weighted sort of voice. "He knew how to open the vault. We was inside for the best part of half an hour after it got dark, cleanin' out the vault, sawin' those back alley window bars and plantin' a charge of dynamite to cover up the truth. Tormey stayed to light the fuze. It was him you seen on that red pony of mine. Arberg took the far end of the street; I climbed into the bell tower. We figured we had to hold the crowd off for a while or somebody would guess there hadn't been time for a getaway after the explosion."

Shane's big hands kept opening and closing slowly at his sides. His eyes looked far away.

"Man driftin' around the way I have is likely to find himself mixed up with the wild bunch," he said. "Arberg and me first met up on Wind River, four-five years back. I helped him out of a little trouble. So when Bates Tormey come by this big idea of his, Arberg sent for me. Neither trusted Tate Mounts' gun in a pinch. I knew Tormey was plannin' to marry into

the family. If he wanted to hook a piece of money from his future father-in-law's bank, it looked like sort of a joke to me. I'd never had no special love for Tom Bannon. So we met over around Sand Springs late in the afternoon. Tormey was scared to ride his own horse. See how it was, kid?"

Harris said nothing. There wasn't anything left to say.

"I had no idea at the time what the rest of Bates Tormey's idea was," Shane went on, building up the case against himself word by word. "I figured all Tormey wanted was cash to buy a toehold of his own in the brand before old Bannon died. I didn't realize his ambition reached to the Redondo. You know the rest of it, I guess. I reckon it was Mounts that Tormey hired to try and kill you from the timber. He was afraid after you'd identified the pony you'd remember something else. I went to Tormey later and promised him if another shot was fired like that I'd come into Spearhead after him, no matter who pulled the trigger. But every day when Connie rode up the rim to be with you, Julia come along with her. Tip, you see how it was?"

Tip said, "I see."

Shane's big hands worked at his sides in a sort of agony. "I'd never met Julia Bannon since she was a woman grown. I fell in love with her in a way it had never been for me before. When that happened, I knew I could never see her married to a rat like Tormey. I loved her too much. I tried to make her feel the same way about me, knowin' it was hopeless to ever think of her for myself after what had happened. But if I could keep her from throwin' herself away on Bates Tormey that was enough. It was Julia slippin' away from him that finally drove Tormey crazy. If he didn't marry her he'd never get her half of the property, and all he'd ever have was the little share he'd bought from Bannon with the stole money. One day Julia gave him back his ring."

Shane groaned, "I knew it was time for me to be ridin'. But I couldn't go, Tip. Just the sight of Julia now and then was more than I had any right to ask, and it meant more to me than anything else in the world. I had to stay. I fixed up my old shack. I never seen that tin trunk buried under the floor boards till the night of the shooting at Wagon Ford, when I carried Chuck Littlefield inside. Tormey kept all the papers from the vault. I wasn't fool enough to have planted the loot there. Tormey did that job and sent Kinsman after me with Arberg and Mounts to tend to the shooting. My end was $5,000 cash from the bank vault."

Tip said, "Where is that money, Shane?"

"What could I do with it?" Shane asked hopelessly. "It burned my hands to touch it later. I'd sooner have cut out my tongue than ever let Julia know. But there it was. After Arberg and Tormey tried to doublecross me I sent the money back to her, tryin' to explain what never can be explained. I asked her to use the money and what I wrote in any way that would help and not to think of me."

"There's one thing left to be done, Shane. I guess you know what it is," Tip said. "I'm takin' you back to town with me. How bad is your leg hurt?"

"I can ride all right." Shane's eyes lifted and studied him searchingly, and he added, "You're right, of course. You've got the same kind of level head on your shoulders that your Uncle John had. But you know what his failing was. You want me unarmed or with a gun at hip?"

"Shane, I trust my friends," Harris said.

VII

AN AFTERNOON sun blazed down on the street, striking westerly walls with a fierce hot brightness and holding the town in a sort of drowsy lethargy. Danmeyer idled from his store on the corner and let down a canvas shade over the ladies' ready-to-wear window. From the corners of his eyes he noticed Abe Jackson shuffling along the shady side of the street toward the hotel, and wondered briefly what had brought the prospector back into town. Danmeyer did not approve of Abe Jackson who customarily purchased his necessities out at Estancia and saved the profit a local merchant might overwise make. The prospector was a stubborn, stingy old man.

But it was different with the two Bannon girls who had arrived from Spearhead one night four or five days ago and been staying at the St. George ever since. Both

were good customers, and Sam Danmeyer hoped all this rough-and-tumble business along the Redondo rim would settle down pretty soon and let things return to normal in the town. Nobody seemed to know exactly what was going on up there, and had Danmeyer been forced to pick his side he would have fallen in behind Bates Tormey. Tom Bannon had backed him and his store in the beginning, and his loyalty belonged to Spearhead. Most of the town felt that way. What Bates Tormey was doing wasn't much different from the way Bannon had built Spearhead in the old days, pinching out the little fellows, buying cheap. The country had respected Tom Bannon.

But the bank standing there on the other corner beside his store with its broken windows still boarded up, its fallen cornice unrepaired and its doors closed, was a constant eyesore to Danmeyer. He had heard that financial difficulties arising from the looting of the bank were the reason Tormey had been able to buy a cash interest in Spearhead and push himself into a position of control under Tom Bannon's will. The rumor was that Tormey had tried a dozen times to talk with Julia Bannon in the last few days, but she had bolted herself in her hotel room, refusing to see him. Once they had been engaged.

Horses that had stood sweat-streaked and droop-headed at the hitch rail in front of the Pronghorn Saloon up street and others waiting about the rear of the courthouse an hour ago were gone now with Spearhead riders in the saddles. There was a continual going and coming of that sort, night and day. No Redondo man left the mesa; but Tormey had set himself up in the back room of the Pronghorn which he was using for an office in town, hiring riders and issuing his orders there and keeping in close touch with the situation and any new development in Clearwater itself. Danmeyer sincerely hoped that Luke Arberg's appointment to the sheriff's office would have the desired steadying influence that the town had been promised.

There hadn't been any law at all for a week, and sneak thieves had broken into a case of fancy boots and leather goods while it stood on the freight wagon platform and Danmeyer had had to stand the loss.

The merchant adjusted the window shade and returned to the doorway of his store, observing that Abe Jackson had reached the shaded porch of the St. George meanwhile and sat himself down there in one of the rustic chairs. Tormey, who had left town with the riders an hour ago, came into sight beyond, letting his sweaty horse choose its own jog-trot pace up the street. Tormey was sitting straight in the saddle with his back stiff, the way he always rode; and from the porch of the St. George the old prospector made no move to attract his attention.

But suddenly when Bates Tormey was opposite, his head tilted around. He turned and looked again and whirled his horse roughly to the curb in front of the hotel. He did not get from saddle, and his voice carried clearly across the hot, still street to Danmeyer's listening ears.

"I thought I sent you some instructions, Jackson," Tormey said.

The prospector nodded. "Reached me all right."

"What're you doing here?"

"Come to return your money," Abe Jackson stated flatly. "Step down from saddle an' we'll git it. Not wishin' to carry any sich sum around town with me, I left it at the hotel desk. After some deliberation, young Link Scott has likewise decided to return whut you give him."

Tormey seemed about to choke. "Where is Link?"

Bates Tormey stared at the prospector silently, and the old man tilted his chair back and got out Link Scott's six-gun from under his belt. He made no move to raise the muzzle toward Tormey, but seemed engrossed in a speck of dust that had settled on the hammer. He got out a faded red handkerchief and began to polish the metal carefully. Tormey raked his horse with the spurs.

He passed Danmeyer at a run and at the corner raced toward the rear of the courthouse. Tormey disappeared into the sheriff's office where Luke Arberg had sat glued to Kinsman's old desk chair for the past twenty-four hours since he had taken control. Abe Jackson, on the porch of the St. George, settled back with the gun still in his hands and seemed half asleep.

But Danmeyer felt something like a cold

shiver touch his spine in the afternoon heat.

In about five minutes Tormey came out of the sheriff's office and cut across the courthouse yards toward the Pronghorn, not bothering with his horse. Arberg, a larger man, had trouble keeping up with him. Arberg headed on up street to the telegraph office and the end of the single strand of wire that spanned the distance out to Estancia and the railroad beyond while Tormey went into the saloon. In another minute a rider ran from the Pronghorn, climbed on a single horse left at the rail and came along street past Danmeyer under a billowing funnel of dust. Abe Jackson, somehow the cause of all this activity, remained seated in his chair on the porch of the hotel with his battered hat laid aside and his white hair standing on end, apparently not in the least interested in the disturbance.

Arberg reappeared, glanced longingly through the doors of the Pronghorn as he passed, but resisted temptation and hurried on to take up his position in the sheriff's office. Connie Bannon in a thin gingham dress, looking slim and cool despite the heat, came out on the porch of the St. George and seated herself sociably in a chair beside the prospector. A freight wagon and long mule team, hauling across from the Corralitos, raised a pencil line of dust in the distance. Danmeyer drew a deep breath, hoping that his fears were all wrong, and started to turn back into his store.

He could look along the side street and just see the rear of the courthouse. Two riders were getting from saddle at the rail there now, beside Bates Tormey's forgotten mount. Danmeye's breath jammed in his throat. Color drained from his ruddy skin, and he took hold of the door frame to steady himself. Even at this distance it was easy enough to recognize the two.

Former Deputy Tipton Harris—or perhaps he was still deputy; it was a point which Danmeyer made no attempt to analyze at the moment—ducked under the rail and tied his horse. Shane moved less easily, one trouser leg cut off at the knee and a dirty bandage wrapped about the calf, and followed Harris. Shane O'Donnel had always made a fine figure of a man and, wanted fugitive returned to face justice, it was still that way. They moved on along the little strip of walk planks to the sheriff's office together.

Danmeyer, braced in his store doorway, was not the only witness to what had happened. From the livery stable on the side street, a hostler's husky voice tore through the hot stillness. "It's Harris! Harris has brought Shane back!"

Heads popped from doorways and windows and the cry was repeated with other shouts and questioning, and suddenly Clearwater town leaped to life. Before he closed and bolted the front door of his store, Danmeyer noted that old Abe Jackson seemed not at all surprised by the news. The old man was shaking his head from side to side, calling something after pretty Connie Bannon who was flying down the hotel steps.

LUKE ARBERG, who had been moodily staring at the picture of John Harris and some dusty, forgotten posse on the wall, heard that shout through the open door and window at his back. Arberg had removed gunbelt and weapon from waist after his return because of the heat. His hand grabbed for the gun; his boots shoved at the desk and spun former Sheriff Kinsman's swivel chair around under him. Tip Harris was already standing in the doorway.

"Arberg," Harris said, "it is the first time I know of that this office has been disgraced by your sort of man. Drop your gun and tear that star off your suspender strap!"

Arberg hesitated, wondering just how fast young Harris might be with a weapon. He wasn't sure about it. That short delay enabled Shane, who was hobbling along behind, to come into the doorway back of Harris. It was the sight of Shane with his old bone-handled Colt at hip that decided Arberg and he dropped his six-gun to the floor at his feet with a thud. He was half-standing with his left hand on the edge of the desk. His eyes, little and narrow-spaced, sought some opening.

"What kind of a play is this, Shane?" he snarled.

"Just what it looks like, Luke."

"Sell out for better money?"

"If I'd sold out, Luke, I'd blast you where you stand," Shane said. "And I

wouldn't miss and hit the wrong man like you did at Wagon Ford. That was the sell-out, Luke. Remember?"

Arberg was remembering. Abe Jackson, one witness to that shooting, was already in town; apparently the old prospector also had Link Scott under cover somewhere. It was going to take the rider Tormey had dispatched from town some time to catch up with others who had left town an hour or more ago, longer for the party to return here. Arberg's narrow-set eyes grew trapped and desperate. He had backed around now till he stood behind Kinsman's battered desk.

Harris was coming down the room toward him, drawn gun in hand. "I told you to yank that star," Harris said.

Arberg fumbled with one hand and ripped the star from his suspender strap.

"Listen to me, Shane," he muttered hoarsely. "This whole thing can still be hushed up. There's a mint of money in it. More than you ever knew about. Give Tormey another two weeks of time and Spearhead will control this country and everything in it. Do you see what that means? Bates Tormey will run it with his own men in the saddle. There's the assessor's and tax office graft; this sheriff's office can be made to pay whatever a man wants to make of it. Tormey's plans include it all. He's already got it in his grasp."

"Not quite," Shane said. "Harris has got it figured out another way."

"It's prison for you, too, if you play it out like this, Shane. Don't be that kind of a fool! Tormey can fix it so no evidence reaches the jury if you got to come to trial. That's been done plenty times. Come over to our side and you'll have nothing to fear. There ain't much time."

"Not much," Tormey said, standing in the doorway. "Make up your mind!"

He was breathing heavily from the run that had brought him across from the Pronghorn. Harris stood halfway across the room to the right of the door, back to the wall as Tormey spoke. His right hand hung at his side, gun drawn but not lifted. Arberg, shuffling backward all the while with his arms raised high as his shoulders, was near the opposite corner. Shane was within three paces of Tormey, and the line of Shane's mouth drew down at the corners in a bitter, twisted expression. Shane's bone-handled Colt was still in holster.

The fingers of his hands spread a little and became claw-shaped with his thumbs against the seams of his pants. Shane was taut as a bird dog pointing game with his weight shifted to his good right leg.

"Shane," Harris said, "this is between Tormey and me."

In the doorway Tormey made no move. What his eyes were seeing now no man knew except Bates Tormey, who had wanted so much and held it almost within his grasp. Only within the past half-hour or less had he witnessed the first signs of breaking, the cracking from within which threatened it all; yet that empire of cowland was still attainable The old hot arrogance that had always been there flamed in Tormey's eyes.

Like Harris, he was holding a drawn gun in hand, muzzle pointed at the sill under his boots. From beyond came the rising sounds of the town, the excited shouting and questioning and pounding of boots over walk planks; and time was running out. But Harris understood that it was neither fear nor indecision that held Bates Tormey motionless with his gun in hand for those passing seconds. Shane was the key man in this. Tormey was giving him time to think it over, knowing just what prison meant to a man who had always wandered free. He was measuring his chances just as coolly now as ever before.

"Shane!" Tormey said.

In that instant Harris saw it coming. He saw the action mirrored in Tormey's eyes before it happened, before he heard the sudden scrape of Arberg's boots on the floor behind. Luke Arberg, moving backward into the corner, had finally come in reach of the old gunrack from which in those other begone days of Sheriff John Harris' time the outlaw Colingo, once captured, had obtained the means of escape. Harris was bringing up his gun at the same time, seeing only Tormey. Nothing distracted him.

Tormey's weapon slammed an immediate crash of sound into the room. Shane's bone-handled Colt had already left holster, and Tip fired after that. He felt the close passing of Shane's bullet like a whisper against the side of his face. Tormey's boots spread a little under him in the door-

way; he took one pace into the room. Harris shot at him again. The blast of gunfire made a solid roar of sound compressed within four walls.

Arberg had stumbled backward against the gunrack. The sawed-off shotgun he had grabbed from the rack pitched from his hands. Tormey's second shot struck Kinsman's battered desk, wide of its mark. Shane did not fire again. Arberg's stumbling weight brought the gunrack crashing down from the wall just now. He slewed around, boots slipping out from under him, and Arberg sprawled among the wreckage.

Tormey was straining every muscle in his body to hold his weapon up and shoot once more. The effort of it set his teeth together, raised small knots of muscle at the sides of his jaws. It was no longer arrogance in his eyes, but hate and a blind, utter fury, savage and black as the old will to power in him. But the gun kept slipping down; he tried desperately to grip it with both hands and thumb the hammer back. Shane, stepping forward, knocked the gun from his grasp.

Tormey watched it fall. With that gun fell his last hope of empire, and he seemed to realize that and it mattered most of all. He took one weaving step back into the doorway, mortally wounded with a red stain spreading across the front of his shirt, and crumpled there, the breath escaping his lungs in a long choked sigh.

Townsmen, halted by the noise of the shooting, came on cautiously across the courthouse yards and stopped in a half-circle outside to stare down at Bates Tormey while others crowded up behind. Shane walked on slowly across the office room, listening to the voices outside, and laid his bone-handled gun down on Kinsman's old desk.

"All right," Shane said. "I'm ready, Tip."

SHANE O'DONNEL was brought to trial three weeks later before the circuit court. The trial brought men into town from Estancia to the Corralitos and even beyond. Shane was known to most of them. Riders came down from the Redondo; Spearhead men, the old-timers among them who for a dozen years had taken part in the combined roundups, sat on the same hard courtroom benches.

Judge Nettleton of Estancia presided at the trial. He had been a close friend of Tom Bannon's in early years.

"You've heard the charge read," Judge Nettleton said. "Now how do you plead —guilty or innocent?"

"Guilty, your honor," Shane said.

A pin dropping in that stuffy, crowded little courtroom would have sounded loud. Jake Doyle, blindly loyal, gripped hard at his knees as he sat forward. In the front row were the two Bannon girls, Julia's head so glossy dark and Connie's tawny-yellow; and desperately Shane's eyes looked anywhere in that room to avoid meeting Julia's.

The facts were all well known. Arberg had lived several days and made his own confession, perhaps for the good of his soul. The shooting of Sheriff Kinsman at Wagon Ford had simply been bad marksmanship; Tormey had sent Mounts and Luke Arberg out there with instructions to wait and follow the sheriff inside and get Shane at the time the arrest was made on any excuse. By misfortune they had met Link Scott on the road and been unable to get rid of him. Tormey had later paid Link $500 to help him forget and tried to hurry old Abe Jackson into the hills in the same manner.

Shane faced no charges on that score. Shane's crime had been his reckless, casual part in robbery which had enabled Bates Tormey to gain his hold on Spearhead and start it all. The court took into consideration what amends Shane had been able to make. But there it was. Judge Nettleton cleared his throat in a dry, hacking way he had and banged his gavel on the bench.

"Two years," he said.

It was the sentence Judge Nettleton usually handed out to an ordinary cow thief. Acting Sheriff Tipton Harris led the prisoner out the rear way and back through the courthouse to the jail.

Two mornings later they walked along the street to the stage station, to begin the journey that would end when penitentiary gates closed behind Shane O'Donnel. No handcuffs linked them together; they walked the street side by side in the slant sunlight of early morning with a stronger, invisible bond between them. Connie was waiting for them outside the stage-house, and she gave Shane her hand

and a smile that quivered at the corners.

"Good-bye, Shane," she said.

He grinned in almost the old way. "Good-bye, kid. Give my love to—" and his words broke on that. "Well, I guess you know what I mean."

"Of course," Connie answered, and questioned Tip with her eyes. "Shane, Tip and I have some things to talk over."

Shane nodded understandingly. "Sure, I'll wait inside."

Harris looked puzzled, and Connie drew him around by the arm. "Connie, what is it that can't be said in front of Shane?" he demanded.

"Nothing, foolish! Don't look that way." She kept her hold on his arm. "I went through the old Norton house yesterday," she told him. "You know, it's for rent, Tip."

"How much?"

"Thirty-five a month. But it's awfully nice inside. There's a fireplace and hot water in the bathroom, and it's all just been refinished."

"Well, I guess we could afford it on a sheriff's salary," Harris considered dubiously. "If you like it, honey."

"But we don't need to worry about money, Tip. There'll always be plenty of money from Spearhead."

He shook his head stiffly. This point had come up before. "That's fine. But we don't live on my wife's money."

She answered with that secret look of her own in her eyes, "Yes, Tip."

"Aboard," the stage driver called. "Estancia and way-points!"

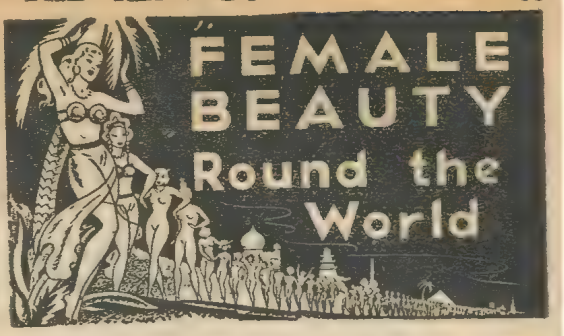
Tip crushed her in his arms. "I got to go now, honey."

"Hurry back to me, Tip."

He hurried away blindly and then understood the rest of it. Julia was standing with Shane inside the stagehouse, her dark head against his chest. Shane took her by the shoulders and held her away from him, and filled his eyes with her so he could never forget. The driver bawled his hoarse "Aboard!" through the stageyards again.

"Two years or twenty, Shane, I'll still be waiting," Julia Bannon whispered.

They walked on to the stage.



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TINHORN TROUBLE

By BEN FRANK

Snag Pine townsfolk wouldn't bet a dime on Tinker Tom Tanner's chances against ornery Jule Hobart. But Tom reckoned there's more than one way to skin a cat . . . or a gun-slingin' coyote.

TINKER TOM TANNER was down on his knees in the dust in front of the lonely little cabin where he'd lived ever since he'd quit being the sheriff of Hope County. In one square brown hand he held a razor-edged jackknife. In the other, a piece of pine board. He swung around to face his audience.

"You fix it like this," he said to old man Haven's kid, Joe. "You cut a notch out like this—see?"

The kid's freckled face puckered into a frown. "Uh huh."

"Then you put it together like this an' you got a snare trigger. All you have to do is fasten it to a little bent-over tree by a strong cord with a loop in it. When Mr. Rabbit comes pokin' at the bait—zowie!"

"Supposin' there ain't no tree to bend over?"

Tinker Tom grinned, shut the jackknife and got to his feet, a blocky young man of medium height with a tanned, round face and twinkling blue eyes.

He gave the kid a pat on the head. "All you have to do is tie the cord to a rock heavier than the rabbit an' hang the cord over an upright stick or somethin'. The weight of the rock will work just as well as a bent-over tree."

An understanding grin came to Joe's freckled face.

Kids liked Tinker Tom. He was always doing things for them, like showing them how to make deadfalls and snares and one thing and another. Grownups liked him, too, only they said he was acting downright foolish lately.

The kid suddenly grew sober. "Tom," he said, "Pa says you're goin' to get yore head blowed off. He says that Jule Hobart is goin' to hear how you are braggin' you can whip him hands down in any kind of a fight. An' Jule is goin' to be plenty mad. Pa says Jule will make yore hide look like a sieve."

Tom laughed. "Forget it, Joe. Why, I can take that four-flusher apart with one hand an' see what makes him tick. I can whip him anyway he wants it—fists, knives, guns, clubs."

Joe's eyes brightened. "That's what I told Pa. But he said Jule Hobart could outgun anybody—"

"He's so slow with a gun I could load mine and shoot his ears off before he got his out of the holster," Tom boasted. "You just tell everybody you see I said that. Now, run along home and catch them rabbits."

The kid went kicking off through the sage, and Tinker Tom grinned as he watched him go. Things were shaping up the way he wanted them to. People were talking about the things he'd said about Jule Hobart. Sooner or later, Jule was bound to hear about Tinker Tom's boasting and he'd come for a showdown. Jule was that kind. Always had been. Even when he was a kid. And now that he had gone owlhoot, he was worse than ever. Couldn't stand to have anyone talk about him.

That was the way Tinker Tom wanted it, a showdown. But he wanted it on his home grounds. He knew he could never beat Jule in a gun fight. But there was more than one way to skin a cat. Or a coyote like Jule.

The trouble between him and Jule had begun way back when they were kids. Tom was undersized, just the kind of a kid that a bully likes to pick on. He was forever making some kind of a gadget with his jackknife, and Jule was forever smashing the things that Tom made. Things like toy wagons, jumping Jacks,

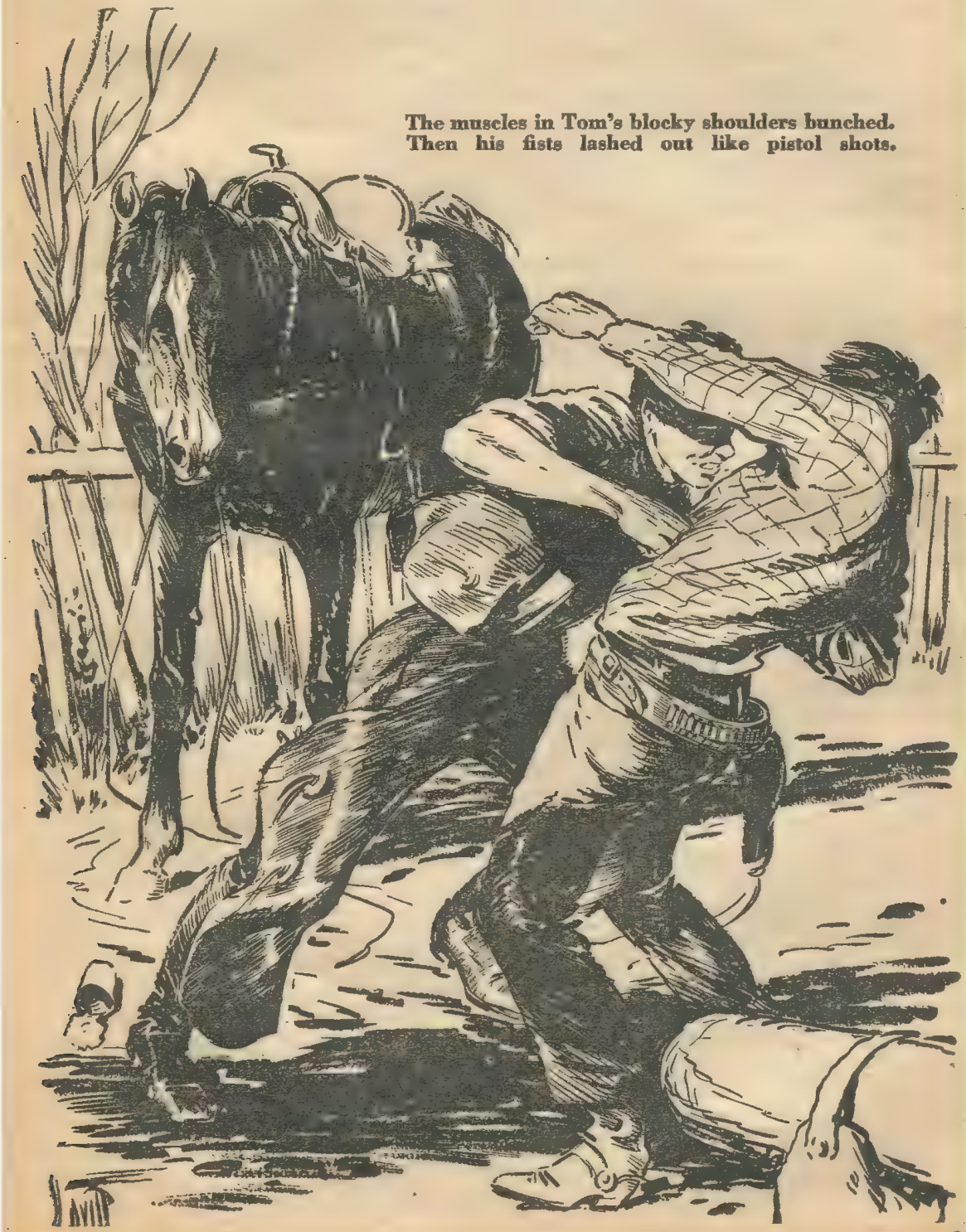
and wooden traps to catch rats and mice.

Tom was expert at gadget making. Give him a sharp knife and some pine boards and he could make just about anything from a toy dog that wagged his tail to a full-sized windmill. That's why people called him Tinker Tom.

Jule couldn't make anything but trouble. And most of that was for Tom. Tom reckoned Jule had given him about as many black eyes and bloody noses as he had fingers and toes.

When Jule grew up, he got himself in trouble. Gun trouble in a card game. He was a wizard with a sixgun.

TOM grew into the kind of a man that people liked and trusted. Especially kids. That was how come he got elected sheriff of Hope County.



The muscles in Tom's blocky shoulders bunched. Then his fists lashed out like pistol shots.

Of course, everybody knew that Tom was no hand with a gun, but peaceful Hope County didn't need a gun-slinging sheriff. At least, not until Jule Hobart came back that rainy Wednesday afternoon.

Tom had been sheriff just two weeks when Jule rode into Snag Pine. The new sheriff was sitting in his squeaky swivel chair behind the battered pine desk, watching the rain run down the windows. He liked days like this. They gave him a good excuse to whittle.

His jackknife lay on the desk beside a half-finished wooden duck that he was making for Jeff Potter's sick boy. He was thinking that now, maybe, he should ask Patty Pierce to be his wife. He and Patty had been going to the Saturday night dances together for some time. He would have asked her to marry him before, but he figured a man ought to have a steady income before he married. Now that he was sheriff, he had the income.

The door squeaked open, and he turned lazily to look up into the dark, sneering face of Jule Hobart. The outlaw had a gun in his hand.

"Howdy, Sheriff Tinker Tom," he said.

Then he threw back his head and laughed as if he'd said something very funny. The rain dripped off his big black hat and fell on his wide shoulders. He scrubbed a thick finger across his flat, ugly nose and down over his whiskery chin.

"Sheriff Tinker Tom—ain't never heard nothin' funnier than that!" he went on. "When I heard they'd made yuh sheriff, I just had to come back an' pay the ol' town a visit. Knew it would be safe fer me with yuh bein' the lawman."

Tinker Tom remembered back to his childhood days and the bloody noses. His eyes strayed to his sixgun hanging on a peg in the wall. Even if he had it, he couldn't beat Jule. He picked up the jackknife and cut a deep, angry gash into the old pine desk.

"Put up that gun, Jule," he said harshly, "an' I'll show you I ain't as little as I used to be."

Jule laughed again. "Ain't got time today, sheriff."

"What do you want?" Tinker Tom asked tightly.

"Mostly to make a fool outa yuh—just like I used to. 'Course, I figured while I'm here I might as well hold up ol' man Pierce's bank. I understand yo're sort of sweet on the ol' coots girl."

After this, Jule ordered Tom into a cell and locked the door. He jingled the keys just outside the bars and laughed again.

"I'll take these along fer souvenirs," he sneered. "Adios, Sheriff Tinker Tom!"

The men who came racing to the sheriff's office to tell him that Pierce's bank had been robbed found him in the cell. It took Ed Hinkle, the blacksmith, a full hour to saw the heavy lock off the cell door and let Tinker Tom out. Raining like it was that day, it was downright foolish to organize a posse and try to trail the robber.

Everybody liked Tinker Tom, especially the kids. The people didn't say anything to him about letting himself get locked up in his own jail, but Tom figured they were saying plenty to each other. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught some of the old timers winking at each other. And old man Pierce gave him a frosty look. Patty was still nice enough to him when she met him, but she seemed to make it a point not to meet him often. He reckoned her dad was mostly responsible for that arrangement.

Tinker Tom spent sleepless nights, thinking. None of it was pleasant. He called himself some name that seemed suitable to the occasion, but that didn't help. He got out the old jackknife and whittled out a gallows. A nice gift for Jule Hobart, he reckoned, for the outlaw had a killing to his credit that would hang him if the law ever caught up with him.

THE new sheriff snapped the knife shut. He'd made up his mind. He would see to it that Jule Hobart stretched a rope. But before that happened, he wanted to beat the living daylights out of him with his own bare fists.

The next day, he called the commissioners together and resigned as sheriff.

"Now see here," Al Britt, a commissioner, said, "you got no need to feel like this, Tinker. A sheriff can't be expected to be settin' around with a gun in his hand, waitin' fer a hombre like Jule Hobart to come along."

They all liked Tinker Tom.

"We won't accept yore resignation," the others declared.

"Okay," Tinker Tom said, "don't accept it, but I'm quittin'. Leastwise, quittin' till the day I bring Jule to jail an' lock him in the same cell he locked me in. After that, you can put me back in office if you want to. That's up to you."

That same day, he moved to the lonely cabin at the edge of town. That was when he started his talking about how he could whip Jule Hobart hands down, anyway the owl-hooter wanted to fight.

People shook their heads and said it was too bad. Tinker Tom was a nice jasper, but since his run-in with Hobart, he had gone a little off the track. In fact, they figured he was losing his mind fast. He was a crazy fool to talk like he did. Everyone knew that Jule Hobart would hear of his bragging and would demand a showdown. Poor Tom, they said.

Everybody liked him. They went out of their way to warn him to keep still about Hobart. They tried to get him to move out of the lonely cabin. He just laughed at them and went on bragging and whittling out gadgets with his knife for the kids. And making some for himself.

He liked to show these little inventions to anyone who'd take the time to look. He made an automatic window release that would let the window bang down on anyone who tried to climb through it.

"To catch burglars," he grinned.

He made a business to stir biscuit dough, and a contraption to wash dishes, only it didn't work very well. Also, there was one gadget that Tinker Tom had spent a lot of time and care on. But he always forgot to show it to anyone. He was saving it for Jule Hobart.

And now, six months after Jule had locked him in the jail cell and had robbed old man Pierce's bank, Tinker Tom Tanner stood in the bright sun, watching old man Haven's kid, Joe, go scooting through the sage with the rabbit snare gripped in his chubby fist.

It was a neat little gadget, one of Tinker Tom's best. It was a sure thing. It never missed. Just let a rabbit touch the bait—and zowie! Mr. Rabbit would find himself dangling by his hind legs up in the air. And the nice thing about it, you didn't have to have a bent tree to do the trick.

Tinker Tom went into the house. His brown face puckered into a frown. The blasted dish-washer was a failure. He pulled out the jackknife and opened it. Absently he shaped a tooth-pick out of a splinter of pine and put it into his mouth. Funny about that dish-washer.

A tiny bell over his head clanged softly. Tinker Tom's heart quickened just as it always did when the bell rang. The bell was fastened by a system of tiny wires to the fence that ran around the house. When anyone came through the gate or climbed the fence, the wires jingled the bell.

Tom leaped to the door. A sweaty horse stood outside the fence. A man had come through the gate. A tall man with a whiskery face and a flat, ugly nose. His hand blurred and came up with a gun.

"So hyar yuh are, yuh two-legged windbag!" Jule Hobart snarled.

"Hey," Tom said, filling his voice with alarm, "I ain't got my gun!"

Hobart grinned, his teeth looking milk white in contrast with his dark skin. He came steadily up the path.

"Yuh wouldn't know how to use one, if yuh had it," he said. "Listen, Tinker, it's gettin' so's I can't be with nobody but what he says, 'Jule, who's this jasper in Hope County who's braggin' how he can tie yuh into knots with one hand?' I don't like such talk, Tinker, an' I aim to stop it!"

Tinker Tom closed the jackknife carefully and dropped it into a pocket. "I wasn't braggin', Jule. Put up that gun, an' I'll show you with my bare hands. Or let me get my gun, an' I'll show you with it."

"Yuh ain't showin' me nothin'!" Jule ground out. "I'm showin' yuh! Pronto!" The outlaw took another step toward the cabin.

Tinker Tom leaned gently against the door sill. "You wouldn't shoot a man without givin' him a chance, would you?"

"Wouldn't I?" Jule thumbed back the hammer, and his eyes were bright pin points of fire. "Just see if—"

TINKER Tom put his weight against the door sill. A swirl of dust leaped into the air about the outlaw. A rope swished; a heavy weight thudded to the floor inside the cabin. And Jule Hobart's

feet went out from under him. Before he could let out a yelp, he swung up against the side of the cabin, head downward. His sixgun lay gleaming in the path where he'd dropped it.

Tinker Tom grinned. "Best gadget I ever made," he said. "Just put a rope on a pulley over the cabin roof and fasten a three-hundred pound boulder to one end an' make a slip loop in the other. Hist the boulder up on a shelf inside made purpose to hold it, an' bury the loop in the dust of the path. Simple, ain't it? Of course, fixin' a trigger contraption that would let the rock fall when I leaned on the door sill wasn't so simple. But after experimentin' with rabbit snares—"

"Let me down," Jule cut in. "Let me down."

He picked up Jule's gun and threw it over the fence. Then he pulled out the jacknife and cut the rope. Jule rolled to the ground and sat up.

"If yuh didn't have that knife—" he began.

"Oh, sorry," Tinker Tom grinned. He closed the knife and tossed it over the fence. His face hardened. "Now, get up an' I'll tie them knots in you! But I was braggin' when I said I'd do it with one hand. I reckon two will be faster an' easier!"

The muscles in Tinker Tom's blocky shoulders bunched. He squared off and let Jule have a right, left, right over the heart. Jule grunted and lowered his guard. Tom put one on the flat nose. It smacked like a pistol shot.

After this, he took a few bad ones from Jule, but returned as many as he took. Jule couldn't take it. He hadn't done any fist fighting since he'd taken up gun-slinging. Too much drink and soft living had sapped him. He went down on his knees and tried to shake the dizziness out of his head. Tinker Tom, still grinning, waited.

Jule staggered to his feet. Tom didn't hurry the end. He remembered all those black eyes and bloody noses Jule had given him years before. He got in close and drove a dozen hard jabs against the man's heaving ribs.

The outlaw went down again. He got up slowly; then leaped in and swung wildly. Tinker Tom let him have it then.

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This time Jule stayed down. Tom took the cut end of the rope and tied the man's hands and feet.

Everybody in Snag Pine stared and rubbed their eyes when Tinker Tom Tanner walked down the middle of the street, dragging an object that somewhat resembled a butchered beef.

An old timer swore. "I'll be hawg-tied if it ain't a man he's a-draggin'!"

Al Britt, the county commissioner, went out into the street for a better look. "Good gravy!" he yelled. "It's Jule Hobart!"

The people took up the yell. They slapped each other on the back and said, "I knowed he'd do it! Yuh can't get ahead of Tinker Tom!"

But Tinker Tom paid no attention. He dragged the outlaw into the jail and threw him into the cell. He jingled the keys in front of Jule's battered face.

"Nice souvenirs," he grinned, and locked the door.

Then he went over to old man Pierce's bank. Everybody knew why he went there. They winked at each other and said that Tinker Tom and Patty Pierce would make a mighty handsome married couple.

There was always a brawl in Murf's place.

THE MUSIC BOX KID

By JOHN A. SAXON

Take another look at that wizened up little guy at the piano, jaspers, and hit for leather . . . for he's not the ladies-man-softie you have him branded.

I WAS ridin' for old man Johnson's Rafter J up in the Panhandle the first time I laid eyes on The Music Box Kid. We were a hard workin', hard ridin', hard drinkin' bunch of hellions—Johnson liked 'em that way. There wasn't a man of us who couldn't hold his hard likker on pay-days. There wasn't one of the bunch who wouldn't gamble his last *duro* of wages on anything from which card would turn up next in the faro dealer's case to what direction a Mex jumpin' bean would roll on the third wiggle.

We came into town hell-for-leather one pay-day night after the spring branding, slid our horses to fancy stops in front of Murphy's Silver Palace saloon and all of us tromped into the place with our spurs up in the "town hole."

Murf's was known to every bronc peeler and hard case from Piedras Negras to the Cimmaron. He sold good liquor, his games were straight, and he had the prettiest dance hall girls west of Kansas City.

We used to have a lot of fun raisin' hell in Murf's. We'd swing the gals until they

were ready to drop, buck the tiger until there was nary a buck left in the tiger or in our pants. Then old Murf would set 'em up for a last one on the house and we'd be off to the Rafter J until payday.

We were a rough bunch, full of the devil and the lonesome feelin' that gets into a man stickin' it out in line camps and ridin' fence for days on end.

Forty bucks and beans is what Johnson paid us, except for Red Thomas, the foreman. It didn't make any difference to us that we had put in thirty days of hard work for those two twenty dollar gold pieces Johnson always handed us on paydays. The sole idea seemed to be to get rid of it all in one night.

Of course there were always fights about one thing or another; sometimes amongst ourselves when red blood got redder under the stimulus of Murf's likker; sometimes with the town boys who objected to our takin' over the place once a month. Once in a while there was a little gun-play, but nothin' very serious, except the time Buck Barron plugged a tin-horn gambler when he found him usin' a table hold-out. We stood off the marshal twenty-four hours on that one; until Johnson convinced the law a tin-horn usin' a table hold-out wasn't fit to live anyhow.

Windy Williams was the first man inside the bat-wing doors that night. Windy usually was. But this time, he'd no more than gotten inside until he stopped so quick them bat-wing doors cracked him across the middle of the back before he got out of their way.

I was right behind him and I stopped too. Windy was so darned big I couldn't do anything else.

"I'll be a dirty name, Tex," he said to me in a voice pitched at least fifty percent less in intensity than he usually used. "Do *you* see what *I* see?"

I did, but it wasn't until I took a second look that I let myself believe it.

Murf had always had music in his place—and always the same kind: an accordion, a fiddle, and sometimes a git-tar. "None uh them blamed tin pan pianies in *my* place," he always said. "I ain't goin' to have a woman pianie player, an' there's only one kind of a place where they have men pianie players—an' that ain't my kind of a place."

THE saloon was pretty quiet up to the time we came in. All the dance hall gals were leanin' over a new and shiny piano listenin'. Two or three of the dealers had left their tables and were bendin' an ear. Even Murf his ownself, his fat red face lackin' its customary smile, was leanin' on his elbows on the bar, listenin' for all he was worth.

There was a wizened up little guy poundin' the ivories and bringin' forth the sweetest darn music I'd ever heard. It made a feller think of warm lazy days layin' on his back under a poplar an' listenin' to the wind makin' music with the shiny leaves overhead.

Murf held up his hand when we came troopin' in, an' there we stood, a bunch of hard ridin' cowmen, tip-toein' into a saloon like we was walkin' into a church where they were havin' a funeral.

It didn't last long though. Missouri Mamie spotted us, said something to the guy at the piano, he shot a quick look in our direction an' started playin' "Oh, Susanna" quicker'n a calf could go through an overbig loop.

Mamie came over to me an' I gave her a whirl around the floor, the same as the rest of the boys were doin' with the other gals.

"What in Sam Hill's the idea?" I asked Mamie, lookin' over her shoulder at the piano player, an' wonderin' why Mamie's eyes had such a funny, misty look. "I thought Murf said he'd never—"

"He's just a kid," Mamie interrupted. "The fiddler and the accordion player were always too drunk to play. The boy needed a job, and one of the girls just bought this new piano—so it wasn't too hard to talk Mike into it."

I took another look. He was a kid, all right—couldn't have been much over twenty. Maybe he weighed a hundred and thirty; maybe less. He looked like one good puff from a norther would blow him apart. His face was pale and I wondered—well, down in our country if a guy has no color you begin to figure on whether he's been sick or been in one of those places where you don't get much sun except at exercise hours.

But, he sure could play a music box. Not only that, but you could see every gal in the place would have liked nothin' better

than to mother him. Dance hall gals are like that. Hard, tough on the outside, but underneath—shucks! Women, ain't they?

There's always one hard-case in every cow outfit I ever rode for. The Rafter J. was no exception. His name was Tim Gleason and he was too tough for even our outfit. I had heard Johnson and his foreman talkin' about him one day. Johnson said: "Keep an eye on that bird, Red. He smells gunslick and killer to me. If he gets out of line one inch—pay him off. He's plain damn mean."

Y'understand none of our bunch were lily-whites, but there wasn't an ornery streak in the whole outfit. We worked hard and we played hard. All good fun.

I saw Gleason watchin' the kid and wondered what he had up his sleeve. We all made a couple of trips to the bar and then did some more dancin' and all the time Tim Gleason kept lookin' towards the piano, an' talkin' to the girl he was swingin' around.

Finally he dropped the girl and walked over to the piano.

"I don't like that guy's looks, Tex," Mamie said to me. "Go over and see what he's up to."

I walked over toward the piano. I never did like to see a big bully like Gleason rag a kid.

"What's the name of that piece you was playin' when we come in?" Gleason was askin' when I got over to the piano. You'd thought from the tone of his voice that he was accusin' the kid of something pretty awful.

"*Symphonique Francaise,*" the kid answered. "D-did you like it?"

"The hell you preach?" Gleason came back in mock consternation. "What's the meanin' of *that?*"

"It—it's a French symphony," the kid answered, lookin' even paler around the gills.

"I did not," Gleason roared. "In fact I liked it so damned little I've a mind to—"

He pulled one of his low slung guns. Not with a quick movement, but slow and thoughtful like.

Of course I knew Gleason was having his idea of fun. He took the muzzle of his gun and made believe he was pickin' his teeth with it. I'd seen him do that before. He seemed to think it was very funny.

"It left a bad taste in my mouth," he said, glowerin' at the kid.

But the kid wasn't lookin' at Gleason. He was lookin' at the gun in Gleason's hand and he was plain scared stiff. I never saw such an expression on anybody's face in my life.

"What's your name, bub?" Gleason growled.

Mamie edged in and stood between the kid and Gleason. "His name is 'Willie', you big ape. Lay off of him." She put a half protectin' arm about the kid's shoulders.

Gleason's guffaws shook the rafters.

"Willie! *Willie*! For Gawd's sake!"

I was just about to horn in on the deal myself when Red Thomas came over and told Gleason to cut it out and put away his gun.

"Quit hoorawin' the kid, Gleason," he ordered. "He ain't used to your kind of horseplay." Then to the kid he said: "He won't hurt you, son."

When Gleason put away his gun the kid shifted his eyes to Gleason's face.

"No," the kid replied slowly and without expression, "I don't think he will."

There was somethin' in the way he said it that made me remember those words for a long time.

We finished up our fun. I went over and asked the kid to play a couple of old tunes that I was pretty fond of. He seemed pleased that I had done so.

We had a good-bye round on the house, as usual, forked our horses and headed for the Rafter J.

ON THE way home, we shot out the only street light the town had. We always did that. It made the marshal sore as a boil. We knew he'd send a bill out to the ranch for fixin' it; old man Johnson would give us hell, then he'd send in a check for the damages and have a quiet chuckle to himself.

I drew the north range for the rest of the summer and didn't get in to town for quite a spell. I'd come in to the big house every ten days or so, and every time I did I noticed that the old man seemed worried about somethin', and Red Thomas had a face on him a foot long.

Old man Johnson had a daughter, Rita, as slick a gal as ever throwed a cowhand's heart out of gear. Every man on the place

loved the ground she walked on and not a one of us but would have ridden through hell and burnin' pitch if she'd said the word.

But we all knew Red Thomas had the inside track with Johnson's eighteen year old daughter, despite the fact that they were always fussin' about one thing or another.

I put Red's sour expression down to another wrangle with Rita. I figured the old man was maybe worried about business. The calf crop was short that year; the whole range was low on water and there wasn't enough grass for the whole herd up on the north end.

That is, I put it down to that at first. But on my third trip in when I saw both Red and the boss still grousin', I figured it must be somethin' else.

I didn't ask no questions. A forty dollar a month cow-hand don't stick his nose into the owner's business, and if your ramrod wants you to know what's under his skin like a jigger, he'll tell you.

It wasn't until I went into town on my next trip that I got the lowdown.

A lot of the women of the town, so Mamie told me, had heard through their men folks about the kid's playin' and some of 'em, after givin' the kid a look-see, decided he was a "nice boy" despite the fact he was playin' in Murf's place, and they had persuaded him to give music lessons durin' the daytime when he wasn't workin' for Murf.

"What's wrong with that?" I asked Mamie, when she told me.

"You're as stupid as those cows you chase around, Tex," she came back. "Rita Johnson has been taking piano lessons from the kid. Her father has raised the devil about it and so has Red Thomas. That's all the good it did. Rita has a mind of her own."

"Well, for Pete's sake," I came back. "What's so terrible about that? You've told me yourself that the kid ain't a bad sort. Suppose he has had an education. I wish I'd had. Suppose he does play a piano in a honky-tonk? He's young. He'll outgrow it."

Mamie shook her head. "You're not only stupid, Tex," she complimented me. "You're dumb. Everybody in town knows that the Johnson girl is in love with the kid, and that he is in love with her. That is everybody in town knows it but the kid and Rita."

"Well, I'll be doggoned! So that's what's been eatin' on Red and the old man all summer. I reckon I'll have to have a talk with that young lady. She'll *listen* to me."

Mamie shook her head. "Oh, you men. Every darned one of you thinks you're smarter than every other one of you. You just got through saying the kid wasn't a bad sort, and he's not. But even in a cow-town, Tex, there's a certain caste system. Dance hall girls don't go to sewing circles, and honky tonk piano players don't marry ranch owner's daughters—not if they happen to be daughters of fathers like old man Johnson."

That kind of set me back on my hocks like I'd missed my throw, set my rope, and there wasn't anything on the end of it. The thought of marriage between the kid and Rita had never entered my head.

I had a drink and went out. I figured maybe the smart thing for me to do would be to keep my nose out of it. If Johnson and Red couldn't break up the situation, I figured I'd better not call for cards.

The kid was livin' in the Silver City Hotel and usin' the hotel piano for his lessons. I was on my way over to the hardware store to order some staples sent out to the ranch when I saw Rita and the kid standin' on the front porch of the hotel. At the same time I saw Red Thomas comin' down the street an' when he saw them, his face was like a thunderhead over Pine Mountain.

Oh, oh! I thought. This looks like showdown.

I WASN'T close enough to hear what the three of them said and I deliberately slowed up so I wouldn't get too close. I didn't want to cut across the street because it would have been too obvious.

The argument seemed to be pretty warm, but all of them kept their voices down. I caught just the last part of it.

"There'll be no more music lessons, kid," I heard Red say in a tight voice. "That's an order from her father. Mine is—keep away from her."

I heard the kid say: "Rita is eighteen now. Shouldn't she be allowed to decide that for herself?"

Red Thomas lost his temper. "Why, you pup—"

He slapped the kid across the face with his open hand. I was close enough to see the mark of Red's fingers across the kid's pale face.

For a moment the kid looked straight into Red's eyes. Then he said: "I'm sorry you did that, Mister Thomas."

It was the same tone of voice he had used when I heard him tell Gleason that he was sure Gleason wouldn't hurt him. Somehow it gave me a creepy feelin'. I couldn't tell why. The kid turned and went into the hotel.

Rita flamed. "Red," she told her father's foreman, "I'll never forgive you for that. Never."

She turned her back on him and walked down the street.

And that's all there was to that. Nobody mentioned it again.

The summer dragged along. We had a couple of early rains and things began to look better. But it was only a lull before more trouble.

Rio Pete, one of our boys, had a pet cuttin' horse in his string that he thought more of than he did of his left leg. Tim Gleason had been after the horse for a long time. The animal was Rio Pete's personal horse and despite Gleason's offer to buy the roan, Pete wasn't havin' any.

Finally the horse went lame. He was all right for a while and then went lame again.

Gleason laughed at Mike. "You better sell him to me before he's no damn good at all," he said.

Mike said: "I wouldn't sell him to you if he never carried another saddle."

It was shortly after that that Tim Gleason's mean streak came out.

"I don't know what's wrong with Diamond," Rio Pete told me one day down at the corrals. "I've had plenty of horses pull up lame, but this seems to be different. He's never lame until after he's been in the corral a few days. Take a look at him, will yuh? You're supposed to know a lot about horseflesh."

We couldn't get near the horse until we'd roped and tied him. I ran my hand down his leg and just above his fetlock I felt a lump. I don't know what gave me the idea, but I told Pete to go up to the house and borrow old man Johnson's magnifyin' glass and a pair of tweezers.

When he brought them back I laid down on my belly with my head almost over the animal's hoof.

It took me a little while to find what I was lookin' for, but I found it, got hold of it with the tweezers and pulled it out.

It was a piece of horsehair that had been jabbed through the leg of the animal above the fetlock.

"That's one of the oldest and dirtiest tricks known to horsemen," I told Rio. "That's what's been causin' him to go lame."

Rio's face was almost white with anger. "So he'd put a hair in there, make Diamond lame, try to buy him, then pull it out and work the same stunt again later. Why the—"

I knew what he was thinkin'.

"Take it easy, Pete," I told him. "There's one thing old man Johnson won't stand for and it's any kind of a stunt like lamin' a horse. He'll pay Gleason off and chase him clear into Silver City when he hears about this."

"I'll handle this my own way," Rio Pete said.

I knew Pete was a hot-headed hombre but I also knew that Gleason was chousin' some stuff with one of the other boys up on the Cienegas and I figured before he could start anything I could get to the old man, who was due back from town that afternoon.

But I figured without countin' in Rio Pete's love for his horse.

When the old man got back I told him what had happened and he told me to go down in the hay meadow where Pete was workin' and send him up to the house.

Pete wasn't there.

I went back to the house and told Johnson maybe we'd better take a *pasear* up to the Cienegas because I figured there might be trouble.

"Where's Rita?" he asked me.

I had to confess that was something else I didn't know. The last time I had seen her she had been in the hammock on the front porch. I went down to the horse barn and her pet Palomino was gone. That didn't surprise me too much because ever since the affair between Red and the kid in town, Rita had been keepin' pretty much

to herself, goin' on long rides, and talkin' very little to anybody—least of all to Red Thomas.

"Probably went out for a ride," I told the old man.

He said something that wasn't intended for my ears that sounded like "stubborn little brat."

THE old man had the buckboard and team hitched up so we used that to drive up to the Cienegas.

We never got there.

Half way there we met a couple of the boys.

"Rio Pete is dead," they told us. "Him and Gleason got into an argument about Pete's cuttin' horse and Gleason plugged him."

"Where's Gleason?" the old man asked.

"He's fogged it," one of the men answered.

"He can't get away with this," old man Johnson said harshly. "Tex, ride into town and notify the sheriff. You boys go back and round up every man you can find."

We whirled the team around and the old man drove like mad getting back to the big house. I saddled up my fastest horse, forked him and was just startin' out for town when I heard old man Johnson call me from the house.

I rode up there. He was standin' on the porch, his face gray as ashes.

"Godamighty, Tex," he said, hoarsely. "Read this." He handed me a piece of paper.

"What is it?"

"It was stuck to the front door with a knife," he answered, then sat down and put his head in his hands.

I read the scrawl. It said:

Johnson:

If you want to see your daughter again, don't follow me. I'll turn her loose at the Rio Grande, but if I'm followed you'll never want to see her again.

Gleason.

I didn't say a word. I stuck the paper in my pocket, roweled my horse and started for town.

I notified the sheriff to get out a posse, went over to the livery stable where we always kept a couple of extra horses. I had pretty well winded mine.

I was changing saddles when I saw the kid. He had heard about it, I could see that in his face.

I let him read the note.

Lookin' at him then, he seemed like somebody I had never seen before.

"Tex," he said, and his voice had the same quality I had heard in it twice before. "Lend me one of your guns. And I want one of the Rafter J horses."

I looked at him in amazement. "Hell, kid," I said. "I didn't even know you could ride a horse. And as for guns—I know damned well you're afraid of them."

"Sometimes things happen that change a man's preconceived notions," he said.

That was a little deep for me but when he held out his hand I gave him one of my guns and told the stableman to let him have one of the Rafter J horses.

By the time I got back to the ranch every man on the place had been rounded up and was ready. They were a grim faced lot. There wasn't a word spoken but I knew what would happen if they caught up with Tim Gleason.

We rode like hell, pushing the horses all they'd stand. Our bunch picked up Gleason's sign about dusk.

We rode all night. We stopped just before sun-up to boil some coffee and fry some bacon, then we were in the saddle again.

Just about daylight we made out two figures, walkin'.

"Hold your fire men," Johnson ordered. "I don't want Rita hurt. We'll string Gleason to the nearest tree we can find."

Red Thomas, who was ridin' ahead, stopped and used his glass. Then he held up his arm and signalled for the rest of us to stop.

"That's Rita," he said hoarsely, "but that's not Gleason with her. *It's the kid!*"

We fed iron to horses then and pretty soon came up with Rita and the kid. The girl was hysterical and the kid was leadin' her, half supportin' her with his arm about her shoulders.

Johnson flung himself from his saddle and took his daughter in his arms.

"I rode one of your horses to death, Mr. Johnson," the kid said, apologetically. Then to me: "And here's your gun, Tex. Thank you very much."

I sniffed of the barrel. It had been fired.

"Where's Gleason?" I asked, and knew the answer as I propounded the question.

"Mr. Gleason is dead," the kid answered quietly. "Unfortunately for him, I had to kill him."

Rita rode double with her father, and the kid climbed up behind me.

Nobody did much talkin'. I guess a lot of them were thinkin' the same thing I was: that even a rabbit will fight under enough provocation. But the piano playin' kid, the kid every woman in town had wanted to mother—

HALF way back we met the sheriff's posse. We told them what had happened. I noticed a lot of the men lookin' at the kid with new respect.

Old man Johnson got a rig in town and took Rita home. Red Thomas went along. The rest of us stayed in town to belly up to the bar and talk it over.

The kid kind of disappeared somehow. It seemed so damned hard to believe that he had actually killed Gleason that nobody even congratulated him.

When we were ready to ride back to the Rafter J. I felt pretty much ashamed of myself because we had let the kid kind of slip away and had done all our celebratin' as if *we* were the ones that had rescued Rita.

"Where's the kid, Mamie," I asked her.

Mamie looked as if she had been crying.

"He's gone."

"Gone where?"

"I don't know. He left this note for you." She handed me an envelope.

I tore it open. Inside was another envelope addressed simply to "Rita". It was wrapped in a sheet of writing paper. The note was addressed to me in a fine, almost womanlike handwriting.

It read:

Friend Tex:

I am going away. Give this enclosed letter to Rita at a time when you are alone with her and I shall be eternally grateful to you.

Kid.

It was three days later when I saw Rita. She looked pale and wan from her experience. I had heard that she had told her father and the rest that she didn't want to talk about her kidnapin'. We were down by the machinery shed and I was surprised when she brought the matter up.

"Tex," she said, softly, "he was wonderful. So calm, so cold, so deliberate. It seemed as though the gun in his hand appeared from nowhere. He said: 'Hold still Rita, this will be very close'. And all the time Gleason was shooting at him and he didn't move. Then—"

She shuddered a little.

"I'm going in to town tomorrow and thank him," she went on. "Dad says it will be all right."

"I wouldn't do that, Rita,'" I said. "He isn't there. He left that same night."

"Gone?"

"He left this note for you." I handed it to her.

She read it, handed it to me, and began to cry.

I didn't try to stop her. I figured it would help.

There were only a few lines. They said:

Rita my dear:

Your father was right, even more so than he knew. This will explain. You are very sweet.

The Music Box Kid.

I didn't get it. I had never heard him called "The Music Box Kid", although I could see where it would be a good nickname.

Something stirred in my memory. I turned the sheet of paper over.

It was a reward poster:

WANTED — FOR MURDER

WILLIAM GARRISON, ALIAS THE MUSIC BOX KID.

$1000 REWARD

SHOT AND KILLED JOSEPH LANE, SHERIFF OF WARREN COUNTY, I.T.

SHOT AND KILLED CASHIER OF FIRST STATE BANK, OPALETKA, KANSAS.

ACCOMPLISHED MUSICIAN. SMALL IN STATURE . . .

Good Lord! And I had thought the Music Box Kid was afraid of a gun.

Rita was still sobbing.

"P-promise me Tex—that—you'll never tell anyone? He—was fine—"

I touched a match to the reward poster and said I never would.

I never have until now.

BOOTHILL LOVES A PILGRIM

By DAN CUSHMAN

There was a lesson to be taught that hardcase crew of Rimfire Range—and they learned it quick: "Don't ever kick a boiled hat, 'specially a tenderfoot's . . . for it's likely to be filled with six-gun blastin' powder."

A Complete Novel of Western Adventure

The gun, batted from Blaise's hand, clumped to the floor.

LITTLE MR. WATNEY, for twenty-one years assistant bookkeeper for T. Watson Beckstormer Co., Chicago, shook some of the cramp from his shoulders while he stole a look at the clock. While he was doing this, the hall door swung suddenly open, and T. Watson Beckstormer himself strode through the office.

Mr. Watney bent over his ledger and worked furiously until the boss was inside his private office.

"Whew!" said Mr. Watney. "That was a close one. Yes, indeed!"

Mr. Watney was still working at top speed when a post office messenger came in and stopped at the desk of Miss Prentice, the reception clerk.

"Have you a Mr. Watney?" he asked.

Work in the office abruptly ceased. Even Will Nessling, head bookkeeper, stared through the window of his cage. This was the first time that anyone had come in the office and asked for Mr. Watney.

But most surprised was Mr. Watney. He climbed stiffly off his high stool, wiped off his glasses, and jerked to attention.

"I'm Mr. Watney," he said in a voice that trembled.

The messenger strode over, thrust out a pad and pencil. "Sign here!"

But Mr Watney knew better than sign anything without reading it. He looked at the blank and the words written there. It was a registered letter from Coyote Wells, Montana. He had never heard of Coyote

Wells. Even Montana was just a pink area on the big wall map where Beckstormer kept track of his accounts. Mr. Watney shook his head,

"There must be some mistake."

"Are you Harvey P. Watney of T. Watson Beckstormer Co., Chicago?"

"Yes, I am."

"Then it's your letter. Sign here!"

Mr. Watney signed. He took the letter, but as he had heard of certain confidence schemes whereby letters such as this were received from Spanish prisoners, he recognized the need for caution. He didn't open it right away. He carried it back to his high stool and sat there, looking at it.

Reggie Beck, the office cut-up, quipped, "Well, Watney, should we call the board of health and have it fumigated?"

Mr. Watney looked around and noticed that everyone was looking at him. With trembling fingers he tore open the envelope and drew out the letter. It was written with stub pen, ornately flourished, and frequently blobbed.

Coyote Wells, Montana Territory
June 1, 18—

Mr. H. Watney
Dear sir:

Some time ago, your uncle, Jim Watney, appeared before me designating you his sole heir, and hence it now becomes my painful duty to tell you that the aforesaid Jim Watney passed away peacefully on the 24th inst. Your uncle leaves 2,000 *patented acres centering in Rimfire range, together with chattels, appurtenances, etc. Trusting an early answer, I am,*

Your obed. serv.,
Judge Thaddeus T. Mullens

P.S. The bullet lodged in the lower lobe of the left lung and your uncle lingered in a semi-conscious state for some time.

T. M.

P.P.S. If you want that ranch you'd better get here quick.

M.

"Well, did your long-lost uncle leave you the old homestead?" chirped Reggie.

The question startled Mr. Watney. "Why, that's just what happened. Yes, indeed."

Mr. Watney spent some time looking at the letter, and especially at that final sentence. Then a thought came to him that put goose pimples all over his back. He thought of quitting his job!

The thought, combined with the mystery of that final sentence, sent a wild urge for freedom coursing through him. Mr. Watney was a bachelor. He had a little money saved. The West called. Why not?

Acting quickly before the decision burned out of him, Mr. Watney put the letter in an inside pocket and strode to T. Watson Beckstormer's door. He walked in without even knocking, and five minutes later he came out feeling strangely light headed and perhaps fifteen years younger.

THE N.P. flier steamed from Fargo leaving the green midwest behind, and, with only two slim strips of steel to guide it, struck boldly out across the North Dakota plains. Mr. Watney, who had never before ventured farther west than Aurora, watched with alarm the passing of his familiar fenced-in and cultivated world.

The train left Bismarck, and thenceforth the country became even more desolate. Mr. Watney stared from the smoking car window, a vast loneliness occupying the pit of his stomach. He longed for his cozy room at Mrs. Wickert's boarding house, for the bustle of State Street, and even for his high stool at T. Watson Beckstormer's. Night saved him from the ultimate of desolation beyond Glendive on the Montana line, and the flyer clattered in at the Miles City station about dawn.

Miles City! It consisted of seven stores, three barber shops, two hotels, fifty-four saloons, and a few lesser establishments scattered over a hundred acres of whitish gumbo which had been pulverized to a depth of two or three inches by the hooves of countless horses.

It seemed to be an early-rising city to Mr. Watney when he climbed off the train about four-thirty A.M. He was in error. Miles City had not yet gone to bed.

Watney walked hurriedly along the plank sidewalks, hiding his apprehension at the booted, spurred and six-gunned citizenry, keeping his eye out for some quiet, family hotel. He ended up at one called "Mrs. Quigley's Cowboy's Rest."

"So you want a room!" shouted Mrs. Quigley, looking at Watney's stiff hat intolerantly. "The best I can do is flop you on the floor with that government horse

buyer in number three."

Watney was distinctly uncomfortable. He cleared his throat and revolved his hard hat a couple of times in his hand. He noticed Mrs. Quigley glaring at him, high-bosomed and florid face. She had evidently been drinking.

"I'm—sorry," he said.

He looked around and noticed a short, gorilla-armed fellow with close-set, yellowish eyes who advanced from the deep shadow at one side of the lobby where he had been snoozing in a round-backed chair. He stood for a while, staring at Watney's alligator valise.

"Is your name Watney?"

"Why—yes."

"Any relation of Jim Watney from the Rimfire?"

"He is—was—my uncle."

Watney didn't like the looks of this fellow. He didn't like the looks of the black belt with its filled cartridge loops which sagged around his waist, he didn't like the murderous angle at which the polished revolver butt protruded from the holster of tooled leather. But chiefly he didn't like the expression in the man's eyes; that bilious, gloating look; that something which said he had been sitting there, waiting for Watney's arrival.

How else, Watney asked himself, would he have guessed his identity?

A peculiar, ice-water sweat broke out at the roots of Watney's hair. His stomach became a bottomless pit, his intestines seemed to be twisting around like a nest of snakes.

But in spite of all that, Watney faced him with the appearance of calm. He bent, hefted his valise, and walked from the door.

"Dudes!" bellowed Mrs. Quigley, watching him go. "So a bed on a good, expensive pine floor ain't good enough for him! I should shoot them dudes when they walk in the door."

Watney strode back toward the depot. He wanted to run, but he forced himself to maintain an even pace. He kept looking ahead, although he longed to see if gorilla-arms was following.

Five or six young men came from a saloon, jingling their spurs, their boots clomping the sidewalk. They all talked at once, filling the air with a slow, drawling speech the likes of which Watney had never heard. They fell in behind him, filling the sidewalk so he could no longer tell whether gorilla-arms was following or not.

When the cowboys turned off along a side street, Watney looked around. Gorilla-arms was gone.

He went inside the depot, trying to laugh at his apprehension. He put down his valise, and his eye fell on the place where his name was stamped in gold leaf. So that was how the man knew! He was an old acquaintance of his uncle's probably. Nothing to worry about. Nothing at all.

Watney sat down on a curved-seated bench and listened to the clack-clack of the telegraph key. A young man was inside, feet on the desk, spearing sardines from a can with his jacknife. Everything seemed calm and ordinary.

"Gosh all Jerusalem!" chuckled Mr. Watney.

HE ALMOST jumped from under his derby hat when the waiting room door swung open. He expected the gorilla-armed man to walk in, but it was a tall, thin-lipped man dressed in a seedy gray suit, dusty fedora, and scuffed patent leather shoes.

"Hi, Wells!" the telegrapher greeted him, munching crackers.

"Hello, Steve," answered the tall man. Then he spoke to Watney. "How are you, Mr. Watney?"

"Very good," Watney answered, stretching the truth a little.

"I'm Wells Ryker, attorney at law."

They shook hands. Ryker said, "You look just like your uncle. Younger, but you look like him. I'd have recognized you anywhere." He sighed, "Ah, your poor uncle! My dear, dear friend. I can't tell you how badly I feel."

Watney said nothing. He was on his guard.

"An outrage, sir!" Ryker went on. "Shot in cold blood. That rustler gang from Diehard did it, you know."

"But why—"

"It was that ranch of his on the Tenderfoot. It controls the upper end of Rimfire Range, and they wanted your uncle to get

off. But he was stubborn and tried to fight them. So one day, just as your uncle was stepping from Leckley's general store somebody rode out of an alley and—wham!"

"Well, gee all Jerusalem!" perspired Watney.

"So you see, I'm very glad I ran into you before it was too late. I can see you're a reasonable man, Mr. Watney. You're not the kind who would walk right into certain death. And it's unnecessary. Yes, indeed."

Ryker cleared his throat and drew a legal-appearing paper from his pocket. "It just so happens I have a buyer for that ranch your uncle left to you, and, by the merest coincidence, I also have a form for bill of sale right here in my pocket."

Watney's spinal column crystallized with suspicion. "How much are you willing to pay?"

"Ahem! I buy for a client, Mr. Tippance Blaise, a great humanitarian. Furthermore, a crusader against the bloody rule of the Diehard gang. That is why he wants the Rimfire ranch, even though it is unsound from a business angle." Ryker chuckled. "Oh, you're a lucky man to have run into me, Mr. Watney."

"Quite an accident," said Watney dryly. "How much does your Mr. Blaise want to pay?"

"Six hundred dollars! Now, if you'll just affix your signature to this line . . . Wait, I'll borrow pen and ink from the agent—"

"I'd like to look at the ranch first, if you don't mind."

Ryker laughed tolerantly, blowing his whisky breath around. "Ranch, indeed! Two thousand acres of alkali along a dry creek stocked with prairie dogs!"

"Then why does the Diehard gang want it?"

Evidently Ryker had no good answer for this, so he paced the station waiting room a couple of times. While he was doing this, Watney looked through the smoky windowpane and saw the gorilla-armed man roosting on a hitchrack.

"Watney, for the sake of your uncle's memory, and for no other reason, I'm willing to stretch a point and offer you eight hundred."

Watney was not tempted.

"A thousand."

"No. I believe I'll have a look at the ranch."

Ryker stopped trying to act cordial. "I'll tell you this—you'd be better off with a thousand dollars in your kick than you would be with a forty-four slug in your gizzard."

"Is that a threat?" asked Watney.

"A threat?" Ryker came down suddenly, for he noticed that the agent had stopped munching crackers to listen. "Ridiculous. Well, just a friendly offer, old fellow. Hope you reconsider. If you do, contact me at the Western hotel."

"Well now," said Watney, watching Ryker stride across the railroad sidetracks. "This *is* a problem. Yes, indeed!"

II

COYOTE WELLS lay 170 miles to the north-west on the line of the narrow-gauge Wyoming and Northern. Over at the unwheeled box car that served as a station, Watney learned that the twice-weekly passenger would leave at three o'clock that afternoon, but it later turned out that three o'clock was merely a goal for the Wyoming and Northern to shoot at, and it was past six when the tea-kettle engine staggered whistling from town along its wavering roadbed, pulling a train composed of an express coach, a passenger coach, three freight cars and a caboose.

Mr. Watney was relieved to see that the gorilla-armed man—"Getchell" he learned his name was—apparently was not aboard.

He watched the drab prairie careen past until it was too dark to see, then he roosted his feet and tried to sleep. The conductor came in, lit a smoky chimneyed bracket lamp, and walked on whistling. Across the aisle a tall cowboy stretched out his legs and slept. Watney entertained himself for a while admiring the young man's strong profile which was silhoutted against the window, and noticing how the rays from the bracket lamp reflected from the stock of his pistol. Watney wondered whether he, too, should purchase a pistol.

Watney had been asleep, but he was not asleep now. He was suddenly erect, heart racing, his spinal column rigid as a pick handle. He didn't know how long he

had slept, but it must have been quite a while because the oil had burned from the bracket lamp and only a dull, red glow came from its wick. The coach weaved on with its clatter of rails, and all around him men were snoring. There was no perceptible human movement, but there was something . . .

He turned around slowly, very slowly. And then he saw someone was standing by the back of his seat. It was Getchell.

Watney sat still, watching the shadow from the corner of his eye and thinking a great many things. For instance, he thought that the man intended to kill him. Yet he was not afraid.

The shadow moved. Something hard with a cold feel of metal was pressed against the back of Watney's neck.

"Get movin'. Back this way."

Watney stood up slowly. He turned and took a step into the aisle. The foot of the tall cowboy was stretched out, and Watney quite casually trod on it. The cowboy leaped awake. His sudden movement caused Getchell to move the muzzle of his gun, and simultaneously Watney dropped to hands and knees. Getchell ripped out a curse and moved back, trying to get his gun in action.

"He's trying to murder me!" shouted Watney.

The gun roared so close it seemed to shatter his eardrums, but the bullet merely tore splinters from the floor. He was conscious of a person vaulting over him. The car became a mix-up with everyone shouting at once. He tried to stand, but he tangled with someone and fell again. The conductor ran in, holding his lantern aloft. It was two or three minutes before Mr. Watney had a chance to explain, and by that time Getchell had made his escape.

"Must have jumped," yawned the conductor, and that was that.

The tall cowboy from across the aisle eased his angular frame into the seat beside Watney, dropped tobacco into a paper, and twisted up a cigarette.

"Y'know, just off-hand, I wouldn't take y'all for the type that had that kind o' enemies," he remarked in a heart-of-Texas drawl.

Sound of the man's voice, and the press of his firm shoulder took some of the chill loneliness out of Watney. He considered the remark the Texan had made. By the light of the match which the Texan applied to his cigarette, Watney could see a reflection of himself in the coach window. It was a familiar reflection, yet this time it startled him—dark business suit, hard hat, boiled collar—he hadn't realized how out-of-place he must look in this land.

"Well now!" chuckled Watney. "You can't always judge a man by appearances. No indeed."

"That's true, seh," said the Texan sincerely.

Watney then felt obliged to tell his story—so he told it all. When he was through, he asked, "What do you make of it, Mr. . . . ?"

"Cole. Marvin Cole, of Brirey, Texas."

Watney was a trifle surprised to find that this weather-burned, craggy faced young man who wore his Colt revolver with such assurance owning to a name like Marvin.

"What do I make of it, Mr. Watney? Why, seh, I reckon the same boys are trying to lay you out that laid out your uncle. The gorilla hombre, the lawyer fellow, and this Tip Blaise must be in cahoots. Seems like I've heard of this Blaise before, but not exactly in a pleasant way." Cole looked at Watney for a while with his shrewd, blue-gray eyes, "What y'all aim to do when you light Coyote Wells?"

The day before Watney could have answered that question without hesitation. But now it made him stop and think.

"You can't just stand around and be a target, you know. You'll either have to cash in or play out your stack."

"I don't quite—"

"Excuse me, seh. That's poker talk. Let me put it this-a-way: you'll either have to sell out or fight it out."

"But surely there's a law in this land!"

"I don't hanker to alarm you, Mr. Watney, but I'd say that was an optimistic view."

Watney thought for a considerable time. "I suppose you are, ah, employed?"

"Me? No seh. I was just driftin' Nawth to see if Montana was as flat as Texas."

"I don't suppose you would consent to cooperate with me in this venture. Say, as foreman of the ranch. I'll be glad to make it worth your while. A percentage—"

"You mean you aim to fight it out?" asked Cole, a note of admiration strong in his voice.

"I do! But, come. What am I thinking of. How can I ask you to share my danger? After all, I—"

"Hold on!" said Cole softly. "You cain't withdraw that offer. No, seh! The offer has been made, and I aim to accept!"

T was noon next day when the train lurched to a stop at Coyote Wells. Watney and his tall companion shook the cramp from their knees, and stood for a while on the depot platform looking down the length of its main street, at its false-fronted buildings, warping in the white-hot sun, at its long, ramshackle hotel, at its bank with the brick veneer front.

They obtained a room at the hotel—the "Grand Central"—and ate thick, rare steaks at a tiny Chinese restaurant. Then they inquired for Judge Mullens, but he was nowhere around. They started back toward the hotel, and Watney drew up suddenly and stared at a man walking toward them. It was Getchell.

"That's him!" muttered Watney. "Then he didn't jump from the train after all!"

"He seems to have somethin' on his mind," drawled Cole.

"You don't suppose—"

"Suppose he's out to get you? Why, after what happened last night, I'd say that was plumb downright possible."

Watney discovered a few drops of perspiration on his upper lip which he wiped off. "Well, gee all Jerusalem!" he swore.

Cole pulled him through a set of swinging doors to the musty-cool interior of a saloon. He ordered beers, slid one over to Watney, and they stood close to the window, watching Getchell. Getchell paced up the sidewalk and back again, interested more in a barber shop across the street than in the saloon.

The screen door of the barber shop opened and slapped shut, letting out a solidly built man with graying hair. The man headed across the street, evidently to intercept a girl who had just left Tucker's general store. He did not notice Getchell.

Getchell had been leaning against a hitch post. He got himself in motion, taking a long step up to the platform sidewalk. Just as the gray haired man was about to pass, Getchell moved over a step, rammed him with his shoulder.

The unexpected blow sent the gray man backpeddling to bump against the corner of the bank. He said something, and Getchell answered him. The next moment the man went for his six-shooter, but he was awkward about it, and Getchell had been waiting. Getchell's hand had been on the butt of his gun all the time. He merely flipped it up, he seemed to hesitate a fraction of a second for the gray man's gun to clear the holster, then he pulled the trigger. The report broke sharp and vicious through the hot, afternoon air. A tiny haze of white gunsmoke drifted away in the sunlight. The victim hung to the brick veneer of the bank, his gun dangling from his fingers. Then he collapsed. A girl's terrified scream; boots clomping down the street.

Getchell made no move to escape. He just stood there by the hitchrack, watching the girl as she dropped to her knees beside the body.

Watney suddenly remembered to breathe. He was dizzy and sick to his stomach. He noticed that he was standing there alone. Cole had gone outside. The swinging door was slap-slapping on its hinges behind him. He was afraid to go, but he was afraid to stay by himself. Yes, "afraid" was the right word, Watney had to admit. He hurried to catch up with Cole who was crossing to the bank sidewalk.

"Seh, I'm thinkin' you should keep yourself out of this" Cole spoke over his shoulder.

Watney was suddenly ashamed of the fear that showed in his face. He was angry with himself, and he flared, "This is as much my fight as it is yours!"

"Why, I suppose it is" Cole answered. He thrust a heavy object into Watney's coat pocket. It was a large calibre double-derringer. "Don't draw that unless you aim to use it, seh."

A dozen men were crowded around the dead man when they reached the scene. A pink-skinned albino was leaning over the girl, talking to her. She thrust him back and stood up. There were tears in her eyes. and a challenge.

"I told my father you'd murder him!" she cried at Getchell who looked on with piglike truculence.

"This ain't no place for a girl, Miss Lennie," the albino pleaded. "You come along with me to Miss Meeny's place. We won't let Getchell do a lope before the sheriff has a go with him."

THE girl was not listening. Over the heads of the crowd she could see a handsome man of massive body come from the bank and stand on the high steps, looking down. He twisted a heavy gold watchchain with one thick forefinger.

When the girl's eyes found him, he swept off his fine, pearl-gray sombrero and walked towards her. The circle fell apart to give him room. Watney heard someone mutter the name, "Tip Blaise."

Blaise laid his hand on the girl's shoulder. "Miss Lennie! I can't tell you—"

She drew away from him. "I told father you would murder him if he refused to sell this time."

"*I* murder him, Miss Lennie? Why, it was Getchell—you can't imagine that I had anything to do with this!"

She didn't answer. She just stared at him and twisted her handkerchief into a tight ball.

"Miss Lennie, listen! You know your father threatened Getchell. You know what he said just three weeks ago. Be sensible, girl. I know this is no time to argue with you, but you'll have to listen or a great injustice will be done. If I'd wanted this thing done, do you suppose I'd have chosen a spot in front of my own bank?"

Blaise made a couple more efforts to reason with her, then he gave it up and strode back up the bank stairs. A while later Watney saw him looking from the front window, his thick forefinger still twisting and untwisting his watchchain.

"There comes Judge Mullens," somebody said.

Judge Mullens was a man of fifty-five or so. He wore a wrinkled black suit, a sweaty campaign hat, a white shirt that should have gone to the laundry the day before—but for all that he managed to preserve a certain eroded, range-like respectability.

When Lennie saw Judge Mullens pushing through the crowd a relieved cry came from her throat, and in another second her arms were around his neck and her head was against his chest.

"Oh, Judge," she wept. "See what they've done. Father—"

"Hush, child!" He patted her shoulder. "They'll pay for it, never fear. You come along with me, now. You come along to Mrs. Meeny's." And he led her away.

A little while later the sheriff, a raw-boned man with a red moustache, swaggered up with considerable show of authority.

"So!" he said, looking at the dead man, and then over at Getchell. "So you two finally mixed it. Anybody see this shooting?"

First man to speak up was the albino who answered to the name of Whitey.

"Andy, and Lou Sibling and me were over in front of the Spade Flush when it happened. Getchell was standin' alongside the hitchrack about where he is now, and Mace," he gestured at the dead man, "Mace come out of the barber shop. Mace shoved Getchell out of his way, they said somethin', and the next second Mace went for his gun. I guess he got his draw hung up one way or another, so Getchell got in the first shot."

The sheriff looked over at the two men Whitey had named. They nodded solemnly. "Plain self defense, Sheriff," Sibling said.

"That's an out-and-out falsehood!"

Everyone jumped at sound of the new voice, and the surprise was even greater once the speaker was located. It was little Mr. Watney. His face was flushed, he blinked his eyes rapidly, and he was trembling. Pointing a forefinger at Whitey:

"That man, sir, is a liar. I watched every bit of it from that saloon window across the street, and—"

"Well, look who's gettin' his two-bits worth in!" Whitey sneered. He swaggered over and looked Watney up and down. "What kind of animal is this, anyhow? Reckon the magpies must have drug him in."

"Sir, you are in league with a murderer! You and your friends were standing over there for the express purpose of being witnesses."

"Listen, tenderfoot, I don't fancy bein' called a liar by your kind." He reached out his forefinger, hooked Watney's four-in-hand tie, and flipped it out. He stepped close, thrusting Watney back on his heels. The little man didn't notice how near he

was to the edge of the sidewalk. He tried to catch himself, but he fell, landing in the deep dust. Whitey jumped down after him, evidently inteding to drive a boot to his head, then he stopped suddenly for Watney was struggling to draw a derringer from his coat pocket.

Whitey's hand streaked for his holster. The crowd scattered. Watney was still jerking at the derringer but one of its hammers was hooked in his pocket lining. A gunshot rocked the air, but from an unexpected direction. The impact of the bullet spun Whitey half around. His gun fell to the dust. He stood for a moment, staring numbly at his shattered right forearm. He turned to locate the man who had winged him.

"You!" he gasped when he saw Marvin Cole's smoking gun still in his hand.

"Yes," Cole smiled, "I thought y'all would be some amazed to see me."

Whitey squeezed his forearm to slow the bleeding. He didn't say any more to Cole than that first word, "You!" He turned and wailed to the sheriff,

"Arrest that man! Don't stand there like a damned fool. Don't you know who that man is? That's Trigger Cole! Trigger Cole, do you hear me?"

"I heard you," chawed the sheriff, looking at Cole apprehensively.

"Arrest him!"

"Reckon I can run my office without your help. You get that arm wrapped up. A couple of you boys lend a hand with Mace. Everybody that seen the killin' be at the jail in a half-hour." He turned to Cole, "And you! I don't mind tellin' you that Coyote Wells is a mighty unhealthy place to keep up a reputation in."

Trigger Cole smiled politely, "Thank you for the information."

III

The lobby of the Grand Central was cool and dark even on a day like this when heat lay in a lifeless layer close to the ground.

Watney and Cole walked in and found chairs from which they could watch both the lobby and the street in front.

After an extended silence, Watney spoke, "Ah — Mr. Cole, you aren't really this . . ." Watney bogged down.

"Seh?"

"You aren't really this 'Trigger' person Whitey was talking about?"

"Now don't tell me folks talk about me 'way over in Chicago!"

"No, but by the way he spoke, and by the way those other acted . . ."

"It made you think I ate men for breakfast when I didn't have hog meat handy." Cole looked thoughtfully out from the window. "Mr. Watney, do you recollect the things you thought about when you were stretched out beneath that hitchrack?" He let Watney ponder for a while before he went on. "Whitey, he was mean. He aimed to boot you, recollect? But, shucks! a kick or two alongside the head don't hurt so much. It don't hurt holf so much as goin' to a dentist, now, does it? No, seh, it wasn't the hurt that bothered you. It was them folks a-watchin'. It was your pride that really got to painin' you. That's why y'all went for your gun, Mr. Watney."

"Yes, by George, that's true!"

"That's how it was with me, seh. I was a button, you see, and sort of wild. Carried a pistol just like a sure-enough man. I didn't aim to kill anybody with it, but I practiced with it a heap just because it seemed like the thing to do. Then one night a man got to trampin' on my pride. Maybe the other man's pride hurt him, too. Maybe I was just another notch to carve on his pistol butt. Anyhow, the way it turned out, I was a bit faster at gettin' a shot in. That's why I'm around today, and that other man ain't. Well, Mr. Watney, to make a long story short, that man had some friends, and by the time they was done with me I had what the sheriff today referred to as a 'reputation,' and I been tryin' to get away from it ever since. But there's one thing I've found out about reputations, Mr. Watney. They're a whole heap easier to get than to get rid of."

That afternoon, Doc Burkie, veterinarian and coronor, held an inquest over Mace. It was established that Mace and Getchell had had trouble in the past. Lennie, Watney, and Cole all testified, but a dozen fixed witnesses swore it was Mace who started it. The jury called it "self defense," and retired to the nearest barroom.

Watney was thoughtful all the way back to the hotel. He asked, "Is your Western justice always as lenient as this?"

"Why yes, more or less, though I'd say it was a trifle more than less here in Coyote Wells."

That night Watney slept behind a bolted door with a derringer beneath his pillow, but nobody tried to murder him. Next day a good portion of the town turned out for Mace's funeral. Jake Lipley, the local blacksmith, conducted the simple ceremony, and Lennie was so brave through it all that Watney wanted to weep. That evening Judge Mullens came up to the room for a talk.

He mopped off his forehead with a blue bandana and looked sharply at Watney.

"Yes, you have your uncle's face, if not his size. And you have your uncle's fight, too, if I may say it."

"Was my uncle murdered by Getchell?"

"By Getchell, or one of the others. Lord, man, what difference is it who pulls the trigger? We all know the identity of the real murderer."

"Tip Blaise?"

"Of course. For five years Bleaise has been reaching farther and farther, gobbling the range like an octopus. First Squaw-blanket Creek, then the Twentymile, now the Tenderfoot. It's water that controls the land here, you know. By the way, has he made an offer to buy you out?"

"After a fashion. He offered a thousand."

"A thousand! Your uncle's spread is worth fifty thousand. His water rights alone are worth that whether he has a head of stock or not."

"Judge Mullens—if you're the law—"

"Yes, I'm the law!" Mullens strode the tiny room a couple of times and ended by pausing to stare at himself in the little, rusty mirror over the wash bowl. "I'm the law, and look at me! A lawyer at the end of his line. These frontier camps are full of us. Disbarred in the East. We drifted. This, or some other dusthole in the desert. They're all alike. And so we sit, drinking our lives out. One bottle a day, two. At last it gets us. We die. And all we leave for posterity is a heap of empty bottles."

"But you're a *judge!*"

"The term doesn't mean much here, Watney. What good is a decision with no enforcement? Blaise is the real power here, and I wouldn't last three days if I forgot it."

After Mullens left a Chinese boy from the hotel lunchroom rapped and handed Watney a note. It was written with a bold hand on Blaise's personal stationery,

Watney penned the word "yes" across the bottom of the note and sent it back.

"Are you going to go?" asked Cole.

"I think the *two* of us had better go," Watney corrected him.

THE lobby of the bank was dark when Cole and Watney climbed its high steps. "Strange!" muttered Watney. "Strange, indeed."

He tried the front door. It was locked. In a moment there was a creak of someone inside, the lock bolt clattered, and the door swung open. Watney entered cautiously with his right hand on the butt of his double derringer. Cole seemed nonchalant.

"Good evenin', seh," Cole said in his habitual soft voice.

Someone standing in the shadow mumbled an answer. It was Lanagan, one of the men who had testified to self defense the day before. He motioned to them and started down a hall, walking with catlike tread despite the hard heels of his riding boots.

He stopped before an office door beneath which glowed a streak of light.

"Blaise!" he called.

There was a clomp of boots inside. The door opened abruptly, and Blaise stood, framed in the light which came from a tripple bracket lamp. He bowed.

"Good evening! Mr. Watney. And you, sir, Mr. Cole, I believe."

The heartiness of his handshake made Watney's eyes water.

"Glad to see you, gentlemen," boomed Blaise. "Sit down! Here, Mr. Watney, not that straight-backed chair. Try this one! I collect furniture, you know, and this is the joy of my heart. A little mahogany Bergere piece I picked up from a river captain. Fretted unrailing. Very rare. Chippendale."

"Very nice," said Watney. He eased himself to the edge of its cushion.

Blaise strode around behind his desk and passed out a box of cigars. Watney took one. The size of it made him seem smaller than ever.

"You, Cole?"

"Thank you, seh, I always roll my own."

Blaise sat down, creaked back in his chair, and said,

"I wanted to talk about the Rimfire. Your uncle's ranch. Excuse me, Mr. Watney, but as you must have guessed, I took the liberty of inquiring who you were when you arrived in town, and—"

"Y-all took the liberty of sendin' your man to meet him in Miles City, too, don't forget that," Cole remarked.

Blaise's eyes turned cold. "What do you mean by that?"

Cole shrugged and brushed an invisible particle of dust from the left leg of his California pants. "Why, I think it would be a good idea if you dealt the cards right out on the table."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

Watney had resolved to go easy, but with sudden anger he said,

"Your lawyer, Ryker, made me an offer for the ranch in Miles City, and your Mr. Getchell tried to murder me on the—"

"*My* man Getchell?"

Cole smiled. "Why all the play actin'? Watney and myself know that you run things hereabouts. And we know how you do it, too. So just talk straight out, and we'll do the same. Do you agree, Watney?"

"Absolutely!"

"All right," snapped Blaise, "first of all I'll say that your uncle's ranch is not worth a damned cent more than Ryker offered you."

Watney smiled, and dropped his cigar in the cuspidor.

"However, I don't want it to stand there to be used as an outpost by that Diehard gang of rustlers. I'm willing to make a generous offer—four thousand dollars."

"I wouldn't sell for ten times four thousand!" Watney barked.

Blaise walked around his desk, fists doubled. He looked like a giant next to Watney.

"I have ways of getting what I want!"

Watney glanced over at Cole, and sight of that calm young man gave him courage.

"I won't sell!"

BLAISE was known for the animal fury of his temper, and it flamed out of control now. Striking with catlike suddenness, he drove the heel of his palm to Watney's cheek, spilling the little man backward in his chair. Cole spring up, and Blaise spun to meet him. They faced each other for a moment, then Blaise backed around his desk. Cole stood, hunched a little, arms dangling, the palms turned a trifle out.

"I'm unarmed, you know," Blaise said. "That is why you're still alive."

Blaise was behind his desk by now. The top drawer was open, and he rested his two hands on the table's edge, just over it. Watney stood up, shaking the dizziness from his brain. He was close to the desk, and his eyes picked up the gleam of a silver-plated six-shooter.

He shouted just as Blaise's hand moved. Cole leaped aside as Blaise's gun roared. Cole hit the floor, drawing as he went. The door to the hall was kicked open and men charged in. Cole fired, but not at Blaise who had taken refuge behind his desk. The bullet smashed the triple wick holder of the bracket lamp, blackening the room.

Guns exploded from what seemed to be every direction, lighting the room smoky red from powderflame. A sudden fury of it—then silence. Blaise's voice—

"Cover the door!"

Watney drew his derringer. The sting of powdersmoke almost strangled him, but he set his teeth and kept from coughing.

"Andy!" said a strange voice close to him.

Watney did not answer. Instead he cocked the hammers of his double derringer.

It was all eerie and baffling. A form sailed through the air, brushing Watney, and down making splinters of the rare Chippendale chair. Next thing Watney knew he was being dragged by the collar.

He tried to fire the derringer, but then he realized he was being dragged by Cole. They reached the fresh air of the bank lobby. A little light filtered in from the saloons across the street revealing the front door and a stairway at one side.

They rushed up the stairs. A bullet thudded a board just beneath Watney's heel, and another peeled a shower of plaster by his cheek. Trigger Cole fired, the flame of his gun passing dangerously close to Watney's right ear. They found protection in an upstairs hall.

It was dark.

"Gee all Jerusalem!" cursed Watney, feeling his way along a plastered wall.

Cole lighted a match on his thumbnail. They saw by the quick flare that the hall ran the length of the building, and then turned left. On each side were offices of veterinarians, lawyers and quacks. Cole led the way to the end of the hall. A door opened onto a tiny verandah, and from there a stairway dropped to the street.

The town lay beneath them, and beyond that the open prairie. It was the open country that looked good to Watney, and he was three steps down the stairs when Cole grabbed him and flung him to the side of the building.

He struck the building as a flame leaped from below. A bullet roared in the air by his ear. Watney fired back.

It was the first time in all his life that he had shot a gun. He'd pressed both triggers, and the recoil from the two .44 cartridges almost tore the little gun from his hand. He didn't know whether he'd hit anyone. There were two or three men down there, shooting from the corner of the bank building, and from the harness shop next to it.

Cole dragged him back to the protection of the hallway.

"Now what do we do?" wailed Watney.

Cole chuckled, "Why, seh, in cases such as this, your true Texas man reloads."

They reloaded. Watney felt a trifle better with two fresh cartridges in his derringer, and a dozen more weighting the pockets of his coat.

Down below, Blaise could be heard shouting orders. Cole struck a match and lighted a lamp hanging at the turn of the hall.

"But . . ." said Watney.

"The forces of evil, seh, always breed in darkness."

HE went along, trying doors. He booted open one leading to a dentist's office. A window looked down on the narrow passageway between the bank and a two-story saloon building. There were Blaise men moving around down there.

"How much would you take for your ranch now, Watney?"

"Not a million dollars!" declared Watney, wishing he were back in Chicago.

Overhead, a fire hole led to the roof. Cole pointed it out, then, without saying anything, grabbed Watney by the knees and lifted him high. Held thus, the little man was able to chin himself through the opening. He reached down and gave Cole a boost.

Cole pointed across at the roof of the saloon. Between it and the bank roof was a gulf of about fourteen feet—not much for a young man, but quite a leap for Watney. It would have been out of the question altogether were it not for the fact that the saloon roof lay two or three feet lower.

"What d'you think, seh?"

Watney cleared his throat. "It takes some thinking, doesn't it?

"Beggin' your pardon, seh, it takes a bit o' jumpin', too."

Somebody bellowed from the hall underneath, They're on the roof!"

"Well!" cried Watney, "what are we waiting for?"

Cole went first. A half-dozen quick steps, and he launched himself. He seemed to float across without trying.

Watney backed almost to the far edge of the building. He crouched forward, took a deep breath, and raced across the roof. He kept his eyes, not on the abyss, but on the edge of the roof where his take-off foot should touch. Across, on the edge of the Saloon, Cole crouched, ready to lend a hand.

With a sudden, sinking feeling, Watney knew that he was out of step. He tried to stop, but he realized that momentum would carry him over the edge. He took a couple of quick steps. His right toe touched the edge, and the next second he was soaring through the cool, night air, vaguely conscious of guns popping below. Next thing he was sprawling face down across the tar-papered roof of the saloon.

Cole dragged him to his feet. A ladder led down through a hole in the saloon roof to the second story. From there they descended a stairway to the bar.

The bar was a glare of light, but not a person was in it. Drinks and bottles stood abandoned, chip-strewn poker tables vacant with cigarettes still smoldering where they had been left. It was baffling until they realized that everybody had been called outside by the excitement.

Watney instinctively started toward the

rear door, but Cole flung him around. He led the way to the green batwing doors. The front sidewalk was a press of spectators. Watney wanted to run for it, but Cole maintained a pace of exaggerated slowness.

It was like walking across a vast, empty stage while multitudes watched from the sides. They swung the batwing doors and strolled out, but no one gave them a glance. Everyone was craning his neck at the bank.

"Reckon it's a sure-enough holdup," a cowboy drawled.

"Holdup nothin'," responded a white-aproned bartender. "Recollect that hard-hat shorty that blowed in with Trigger Cole? Looked pretty meek, didn't he? Know who he was? He was old Jim Watney's nephew, and he had his craw filled with revenge. Just goes to show that you can't judge a snake by the length of his rattles."

Cole and Watney crossed the platform sidewalk, descended three steps to the cinder path in front of the newspaper office, and stepped up to the sidewalk front of a general store. They were thirty or forty paces away by the time Blaise's men clomped through the empty saloon. The batwing doors flew open and flapped furiously as men rushed out and fired questions at spectators.

Cole nudged Mr. Watney, and they stepped into the shadow of a side street. The street led to a round-roofed livery stable. The night hostler stood at the door wondering what all the shooting was about. Cole went in, took a look at the stock, and pointed out a team of bays.

"Saddle 'em!" he said.

The hostler recovered from his surprise, "You're loco! That's Blaise's carriage team. Brought 'em clear from Ioway, and—"

"Then I reckon they'll be satisfact'ry. You just tell Blaise that his friend Trigger Cole had a hankerin' for 'em."

Mention of the name was all it took. The hostler worked madly with saddles and bridles and led them to the door.

The bays twisted and sidestepped, nervous at the unaccustomed feel of saddle leather. Watney wasn't much of a rider, but he succeeded in forking one of them. The hostler kept hold of the bridles until Cole was mounted, then he turned them loose. A bronc under similar circumstances would have hit the yard sunfishing, but the high-blooded carriage team took it on the run.

Their pace satisfied Watney well indeed. The outskirt shacks and rubbage heaps of the camp flashed by, and in less than a minute the cool, sage-laden breath of the prairie was fanning his cheek.

"I'm certainly glad to be leaving that town," he said. "Yes, indeed!"

IV

MANY MILES separated them from Coyote Wells by morning. They could see the town quite perfectly down across the gently dropping land. There was no sign of pursuit. No movement, save for a team and wagon that came crawling along a couple miles from town.

They rested out the noon hour in a steep-sided coulee. Watney was glad because it gave him a chance to get the saddle cramps out of his legs, and size up the country.

In time, the team and wagon came in sight over the bulge of a knoll and creaked toward them, kicking up a haze of dust with its low, metal wheels. The team didn't amount to much—just broncs—and the driver was kept busy trying to balance the doubletree. For a long time Watney thought the driver was a boy, but then a breeze came and flung out a wisp of long hair, and he recognized Lennie Mace.

Watney wondered what he should say in the way of consoling her about her father's death, but she was the one who solved that.

"I want to thank you both for coming to father's funeral," she said, pulling in the broncs and wrapping the lines around the handbrake. "It helped to know I had *two* friends there."

"You had a heap o' friends there, Miss Lennie," said Cole.

"Maybe." And the subject was changed. "You're going to take over the Rimfire?" She directed the question at Cole.

He twisted his soft Stetson and nodded seriously, "Yes'm. Mister Watney, here, has decided to fight it out. I think it's sure enough brave of him."

"Oh, fiddle-faddle!" blushed Watney.

"It's brave," she said "but . . ."

"But crazy?" Watney nodded. 'I've led a sane life for fifty-one years, Miss Mace,

but I'm not going to be cheated by a gang of cutthroats.

"Do you realize what you're up against?" she asked with piercing directness.

"Reckon he has an idea after last night," drawled Cole.

"Yes indeed!" chuckled Watney. "And maybe they have an idea what they're up against, too.

The girl didn't smile at Watney's jest.

"I don't want to scare you. It's a cinch I need friends in the country if anyone does. But I'm going to tell you about Tip Blaise. He came here from Colorado and started the bank six years ago. It was a hard winter with an iced-over range. Cattle stacked up in the coulees and died by thousands. In the spring, Blaise was the only one left who had money to restock. That's when he got control. But Blaise didn't just stock cattle. He brought in sheep. When there was a range he wanted, he worked it over with his woolies so cattle ranchers had to move on. Some of the ranchers fought—but they lost. They drifted to Indian country around Milk River, and lots of them settled over at Diehard and took to rustling. Finally there were only two left—Jim Watney and my father."

"What d'you aim to do, Miss Lennie?" asked Cole.

"Fight it out—like you."

"But you're a girl!"

"Then that's my advantage."

Watney was not used to the saddle, so he rode beside Lennie in the wagon while Cole came alongside on the bay. They traveled on through the hot hours of afternoon, and toward evening they dropped to the bottom of a broad coulee where a cottonwood shack and some pole sheds were sinking into ruin.

"Driven out?" asked Watney.

Her mouth became a straight, hard line, and she answered, "It belonged to Sam Botts. Somebody poisoned the grass around his springhole. Forty of his cows died in one day. He hanged himself right over there on the crossbar of the corral gate."

Lennie drove over to the spring and watered her team. She headed up the steep pitch leading from the coulee, and Watney looked back at the corral gate.

"Jumping Jerusalem!" he swore.

Lennie's place—the Block M—occupied broad flats on the Tenderfoot, a clear, cold stream darting with small trout. Lennie's mother had died a few years before, and when they arrived there was no one home except Hip Fong, the Chinese cook. Her two riders, a couple of spavined old timers called Muggins and Arapahoe were out riding line.

"Have trouble keepin' punchers?" asked Cole.

She nodded. "There aren't many willing to ride for outfits disputing water and range with Blaise. But I'm better off than the Rimfire. Jeff Pitt, the old camp cook, is the only one left there since Jim Watney was killed."

After supper they said goodbye to Lennie and covered the remaining ten miles to the Rimfire.

Watney drew up and looked at the place spread before him in the moonlight. Like the Block M, this home ranch consisted of a log house and barn, of pole corrals, and wide meadows through which Tenderfoot creek wound its way. A reddish light shone through one window down in the house. They rode down, dismounted, and peeped inside. A bacon-fat lamp sat on a table, its flame casting light on a barren little room, cot at one side, harness hung on the wall, one broken-down chair with a pair of ragged, angora chaps tossed over it.

A foot stirred on the earth behind them, and they spun to find themselves staring down a gun barrel that seemed large as a train tunnel. It was a moment before Watney looked beyond the muzzle to the man who was pointing it. He was a man of sixty or so, his face gray-stubbled, his hair stringing from beneath a shapeless Tom Watson hat. The stubble revolved for a while around a chaw of tobacco, then they parted and the man spoke,

"Skulkin' mighty quiet, ain't ye?"

"Ah—you're Jeff Pitt, I presume?" asked Watney, wishing he'd angle the pistol off to a less personal direction.

"Mebby I am."

"Well, my name is Watney. Harvey P. Watney of Chicago. I'm—"

"Not *you!*" Jeff stepped back and squinted from several angles. "Yep, that's the Watney nose, ding blast it." He put his old long-barreled pistol back in the band of his pants and cursed himself out of breath. "And to think I been waitin' for this! Why, I expected a ring-tailed rangy-

tang like old Jim. And what do I get? A dude in a boiled hat!"

Trigger Cole took time for a good stretch and yawn. "Just a word of advice, Jeff—don't ever kick a boiled hat. It's likely to be filled with blastin' powder. Yes seh! —it sure is."

SEVERAL weeks passed quietly. None of Blaise's gunhands came near the ranch. A couple of saddle tramps drifted in from the Musselshell where they had been riding the big circle for the 79, and Watney put them to work combing coulees for Rimfire cattle while he and Cole worked the benches. One morning they drove in a little herd of beef stock and found the usually glass-clear waters of Tenderfoot creek gray with silt. That night the two saddle tramps drifted in with news that a dozen teams of scrapers were working at the Wrinkle place five or six miles above. Wrinkle was a squawman, and one of Blaise's underlings.

For two weeks the water was muddy, then one morning they woke up to find only a series of pools where the creek had been. The water became warm, and the trout turned up their bellies and died. Watney spent considerable time wandering along the creek, thinking.

That night when they were sitting around in the light of the bacon grease dip, Watney said,

"Anyhow, we got upwards of seven hundred head. It's my opinion we ought to ship."

"Ship!" cackled old Jeff. "Where from?"

"From Coyote Wells, of course."

"Why do you think them steers weren't shipped last fall? A man don't hold four year olds over for the fun of it."

"I never considered the matter."

"I'll tell you why! Because Blaise owns a big chunk in that railroad and prevented Jim from gettin' the cars. Jim said he didn't need cars. He said he'd drive to Miles and ship on the N.P., but Blaise had an answer for that, too. He stampeded the bunch. Jim went after 'em, but they was spread across that Arrow River range. A dozen of Blaise's boys came up and stopped him. Long-geared fellow named Ratche said, 'Jim, if you want your cattle, you come down on the spring roundup and rep for 'em.' Jim was fightin' mad, but what could he do? He rode back home. Then this spring he sent a rep down, but he never did get more'n three-fourths of 'em."

Cole asked, "Jeff, how did Jim Watney ship before the N.P. or the W & C were built?"

"By steamboat to Kansas City. Diehard was a big shippin' point in them days."

"Then there's your answer! Let's ship from Diehard."

"Guess you ain't heard what sort of town Diehard is. She's an outlaw camp and a bad one. Even Blaise ain't big enough to ride down there and start a ruckus, much as he'd like to."

Cole smiled and twisted up a cigarette. The red flame of the grease-dip lit up the strong lines of his face as he leaned forward to get a light. He settled back and blew a cloud of smoke.

"Reckon I'll drop over to this Diehard and chin some with them outlaw boys. We talk the same language, more or less."

Deep in the badlands stood the town of Diehard, a long row of warping false fronts beside the Missouri River, its population consisting of renegades, outlaws, wolfers, woodhawks for the river boats which still steamed past to Benton, and the small ranchers who had been driven from the range by Tip Blaise. It had a saloon, the "Pilot House" which prophecy said would some day sink in the river silt from the lead she carried in her walls, and it had a store owned by one-eyed Jake Grubbs, the camp's self-styled "mayor."

Two days after the water of Tenderfoot Creek had been shut off, Watney and Cole visited the town. It lay in a deep-cut coulee with grayish clay walls, the "Big Muddy" rolling at its feet, peaceful in the afternoon sun despite the violent stories which were told about it. There was not a dead man on the street, nor a gunshot in the air. They rode in without causing a stir of interest. The only human they could see was a broad, squat man with a tangle of black whiskers who was tilted back in a chair in front of the general store. They drew up and tied their horses to a sagging hitchrack. They saw that the man had one eye on them from the shadow of his hat—the other eye was open, too, but it was just blank white, hopelessly staring.

"Reckon you're Grubbs, the proprietor," drawled Cole.

"The same." Grubbs shot tobacco juice across the sidewalk.

"Then you're the man we came to see."

"Look me over, gents. I wouldn't be great shakes in a high-class city like Miles, but I'm plenty good for a camp like this'n. We ain't a heap particular here in Diehard."

Cole grinned. "I'm right glad to meet you, seh. I'm Marvin Cole, and yonder is my boss, Mr. Watney, owner of the Rimfire."

Grubbs showed enough interest to thump forward in his chair.

"Any relation of Jim Watney's?"

"My uncle."

"You don't look like him."

"I—I took after my mothers people."

Grubbs made a sympathetic sound in his throat. He looked at Watney and chawed for a while. "How do you get along with Blaise—the Coyote Wells philanthropist?"

"He tried to murder me twice. And now he's trying to break me."

"Likely do both before he's through."

"No," said Watney firmly, "I don't believe he'll do either."

Grubbs chawed for a while looking at Watney with his shrewd eye. "Say! maybe you look a bit like Jim Watney after all."

Men had appeared along Diehard's street and came drifting up toward the store. They lounged around, looking at Cole and Watney. In a little while twelve or fifteen had gathered—hard looking renegades, former cowboys, a grizzled wolfer as flea-ridden as the animals he hunted, a one-legged scoundrel who hobbled along using a 30-30 rifle for a crutch.

The one-legged one paused out in the street, reared back on his good leg, and pointed his rifle at Watney without cocking it. He said in his magpie voice,

"Dog me! I ain't seen store clothes like them since I robbed that parlor train at Rocky Ridge. What you lookin' for, dude? They ain't anybody comes to Diehard for the scenery."

"Yes," said Grubbs, "What you got on your mind?"

Watney said, "We have in mind using your old loading docks. We want to ship a herd of cattle by steamboat."

"What's wrong with the railroad?"

"Tip Blaise owns it."

Grubbs chuckled, "And you want to drive your critters down here? Our reputation ain't particular good with other folks' cows, Watney."

"I'll take my chances."

The one-legged one, whom they called Stupy, hobbled up and glared at Watney suspiciously. "There's somethin' wrong with this. This is a trick. Maybe Blaise has an idea to clean us out."

One of the rustlers grinned, "Watney there don't look special like a Blaise gunman."

"No? Well, don't be fooled by a man's looks. You should have seen the Pinkerton deteetive that slapped me inside the Yuma pen!"

A middle-aged man with faded eyes spoke up, "Tip Blaise shot my pardner and sheeped my outfit off the range. If anybody suspects him, it ought to be me. But I can't imagine him drivin' a herd down here as part of a plan to clean us out. I say, let the lads load on the steamboat."

Most of the others lined up with his sentiment. This Diehard crowd did not trust Cole and Watney. They didn't trust anybody—not even one another. It was just that they were confident of their own power no matter what anybody decided to do.

After Watney set up drinks at the Pilot House, even Stumpy stopped objecting.

WHEN they returned to the Rimfire, they met Jeff Pitt riding up from his weekly trip to the mailbox down on the stage road with a sizeable accumulation of Helena papers. Watney sat down on the kitchen step and went through them. He found out that the Chouteau County representative in the Territorial Legislature was screaming his head off for range control and that Coyote Wells had been held up as the worst example of abuse.

"I demand that a committee from this body visit Coyote Wells before the beef roundup," he said in one issue. In the next he added a U. S. marshal and some deputies to his demands. For two issues the legislature wrangled, and then a solid majority gave him its support.

"We're saved," shouted Watney jubilantly, hurrying down to the corrals.

"Blaise won't dare do a thing with the Legislature watching him."

Cole hunkered down and read slowly through the items while Mr. Watney jigged from one foot to the other watching him. He laid aside the papers carefully and said:

"I sure would hate to have you underrate Tip Blaise, seh. He won't quit because a committee and a couple of lawmen are on their way to look into his affairs. My guess is he'll fight all the harder to get us licked and buried before they get here. Then he can say, 'See, gents? We ain't havin' no trouble a-tall.' No, Mr. Watney, I'd say we could expect some unpleasantness from Blaise—and soon."

"Dear me!" said Watney.

Next day Cole saddled and rode down to see Lennie Mace. He met her riding upstream a mile from her corrals.

"I was coming to see you." She smiled, and she was beautiful, but it seemed to Cole that worry was taking some of the girlish freshness from her face. "I understand you're going to ship."

"Yes'm."

"From Diehard?"

"Word seems to get around.' He wasn't surprised. News traveled fast by cayuse telegraph. Blaise probably knew, too. He had his men planted at Diehard.

She asked, "Do you think you'll get away with it?"

"With shippin' from Diehard? I don't know, Miss Lennie. But it's better than waitin' to be shot in the back."

"I started to round up a week ago."

Cole lifted his eyebrows. "How you aimin' to ship?"

"From Diehard."

"With us?"

"If I'm invited."

"You sure are," he said, smiling slow. "Yep, you sure are!"

V

IN a week, two thousand head of steers and breeding stock had been grazed to the table land near Lick Springs. Jeff Pitt, who had been sent to Fort Benton, returned with word that Diamond B sternwheelers would stop at the long disused Diehard docks in six days. The water at Lick springs was fast disappearing, but Cole guessed the herd could hold out that long.

In the evening, Arapahoe, the spavined old Block M cowpoke, rode back from Diehard with a caddy of Durham and some disquieting news.

"Grubbs said you'd better come down and look things over," he said to Cole. "It seems there's a one-legged hombre named Stumpy has fetched in some of his boys and they're plumb riled about cattle bein' driven down there. Stumpy's claimin' it's all a Blaise plot to clean 'em out."

Cole had been sprawled in front of the sagebrush fire where beans were cooking. At Arapahoe's words he got himself out to the remuda and was building himself a loop when Mr. Watney caught up.

"You can't go down there alone!"

"No?"

"No! It's not safe. You'd better take five or six men along with you."

"And get us all shot? Listen, Mr. Watney, one man would be safer than a dozen. I've seen these rustler towns before."

"Well, I'm going along."

"I'd rather—"

"And as owner of the ranch, you can't stop me."

"Why, no seh, Mr. Watney. Put it that-a-way and I don't guess I can."

Darkness was gathering in the deep, badlands coulee where Diehard stood when they got there. Someone was going through the saloon, lighting hanging lamps. Grubbs' store was dark, but they could see him out in front, tilted in his chair, swatting mosquitos.

They dismounted.

Grubbs spoke, "Evenin', Cole. Evenin', tenderfoot."

"What was y'all tellin' Arapahoe?" asked Cole.

"Just that Diehard was like dynamite on a short fuse. There's them which side with you, and them which don't. We had a bit of a shootin' over it last night. Leg wound. Personally, I wish you'd never come over here with your idea of shippin' from the docks. What you aim to do?"

"To ship, of course!" said Watney.

Grubbs shrugged. "They're your cows."

Cole asked, "Who is it that's ringy?"

"Stumpy, Whitey Marlin, a scar-faced fellow from down Hole-in-the-Wall way called 'The Dutch.'"

"They around now?"

"In the saloon, I reckon."

"Whitey Marlin!" muttered Watney as he hurried, taking three steps to Cole's two all the way to the saloon. "Isn't that the same Whitey that—"

"He's the one."

"But he's Blaise's man."

"Yep! And I'd guess Stumpy was a Blaise man, too."

Three hanging lamps burned in the saloon. Men were gathered around a table playing stud poker. The proprietor, an unwashed fellow named Phillips, stood scowling behind the bar.

Chips rattled and there was the usual poker conversation when Cole and Mr. Watney walked through the swinging doors, but silence of a deadly, expectant quality clamped down before they were three steps inside.

Watney glanced over at the poker players and was met by the pale, deadly eyes of Whitey, the albino from Coyote Wells. He sat, one hand poised, holding half a dozen white chips. The other hand, Mr. Watney noticed, was out of its sling, but a few wraps of dirty bandage still showed beneath his sun-faded shirt.

Cole ambled to the bar and roosted a boot on the rail. To Watney, who did not realize the revealing powers of mirrors, this seemed pure madness. He whispered,

"Whitey's over in that game."

"Sure. I know. And Stumpy's in that chair at the end of the bar. It's like walkin' into a snake den, ain't it?"

Watney hadn't seen Stumpy. He looked to the dim end of the room, and sure enough, there Stumpy sat, his stub leg propped up, his long, evil looking fingers caressing the octagonal barrel of his rifle.

"Whisky," said Cole when Phillips came up.

"The same," muttered Mr. Watney through his dry throat.

Phillips, watching with morose eyes, clumped out an unlabeled bottle. Cole poured a drink and inhaled its odor. "Don't drink it," he said to Watney.

"Is it—poisoned?"

"It's trade whisky. It don't need to be."

Cole rolled out a five-dollar gold piece, and Phillips tossed it in the cash drawer.

"I'll take my change, seh," said Cole.

Phillips rubbed his palms on his hips as though drying them. His quick eyes shifted to Whitey, to Stumpy, and back again. The glance seemed to tell him something. Someone moved over at the poker table, and the squeak of his chair seemed very loud. Phillips grunted and speared four silver dollars, clanking them on the bar. Cole gathered them with his left hand and dropped them in his pocket.

Unexpectedly, Cole turned and faced Whitey.

"Still workin' for Tip Blaise?"

Whitey tossed down the chips in his hand and barked, "No!" He then proceeded to call Blaise some obscene names. "I'm through with him for good. He tried to drygulch me, so I had to hide out here."

Cole went on, speaking slowly, "I understand you been sayin' Mr. Watney and me was Pinkerton men. Said we was sent down to clean out Diehard. Is it you that was sayin' them lies, Whitey?"

"You just want an excuse to kill me," Whitey whined.

"I've had that for a long time."

THERE was a scrape of boots on the platform sidewalk, and three strange renegades strolled in. Whitey, seeing them, took a deep breath and relaxed a little. He tossed some chips in the pot. Slowly, with measured movements, a big, rawboned man started to deal the cards. The three renegades walked up to the bar. One of them rammed against Mr. Watney.

"Excuse me, shorty," he said, grinning lopsidedly because of a scar which ran down his left cheek to the point of his chin.

"Certainly," said Mr. Watney, moving a step away, his hand feeling by habit of the derringer in his coat pocket.

The scarfaced fellow tossed down one shot of the trade whisky and poured another. He nudged close to Mr. Watney,

"Drink up and have one on me, shorty."

"No thanks." Watney wanted to escape, but Cole seemed in no hurry to move. Grubbs strolled in and roosted himself on a chair to watch the poker game. Watney breathed a trifle easier. Grubbs, he felt certain, was a friend. He picked up his drink and swallowed it at one gulp. Trade whisky or no trade whisky, it made him feel better.

The scarfaced one looked down and

grinned. He started to talk in a drawl not unlike Trigger Cole's.

"Y'know, I've been on the high lope from you Pinkerton men in so many territories I could spot one of you blindfolded just by the smell. I recall one time in Abeline there was a dude came all dressed up in Englishman's pants with one of them glass things in his eye. Y'know—"

"I am not a Pinkerton detective!" said Watney. He knew everyone was looking at him. To hide his nervousness he picked up the bottle of whisky, but his hand trembled so badly he put it down again.

"You ain't?" The scarfaced man was grinning. His voice was very soft. It reminded Mr. Watney of the fur covering the claws of a cat. He nudged over a trifle closer, so his arm was against Watney's shoulder.

"Leave him alone, seh," said Cole.

The scarfaced man shrugged and poured himself another drink. "If the other folks in Diehard like Pinkerton men, who am I to raise a ruckus? I'll tell you though, we don't cotton to 'em down in Rustler's Hole where I come from."

"Gents!" Phillips held up his hand for attention. "I've had some dealings with Pinkerton men myself, and I guess some of you other boys have had, too. There's one thing I've found out about Pinkertons—they always have a badge on 'em someplace. Sometimes it's in the lining of their vest. Or inside a hatband. Why, the Pinkerton that nailed me after that Yellowstone stage hold-up had his badge inside the heel of his boot. Now, what I say is this—if the shorty is on the level, maybe he wouldn't object to us lookin' him over for his badge."

Phillips waited, hands planted on the bar. Watney glanced around. The room was waiting. He took a step away from the bar and nodded.

"Mr. Watney, seh—" started Cole, but Mr. Watney lifted his elbows defiantly.

"Go ahead and search."

Grubbs thumped forward on the front legs of his chair. As "mayor" of Diehard, searching suspected Pinkertons was obviously in his province, but Stumpy came from his chair, using his rifle in a grotesque gallop to head him off.

"I'll search him! And if he's a Pinkerton . . ."

Stump reached in Watney's right hand coat pocket and drew out the big-bore derringer. He cackled something and put it back. He reached in Watney's vest pockets and fumbled around to the coat pocket on the other side. He snatched out something and waved it overhead,

"It's a Pinkerton badge! See for yourselves!"

Watney was stunned. Then he remembered being nudged by the scarfaced man. That was how it got in his pocket. He tried to say so, but the place was in an uproar.

"Hang him!" Stumpy was shouting. "Hang 'em both!"

Watney caught sight of Cole, backed toward the rear of the room, eyes gone cold, his gun hand hanging with that long looseness he had seen once before in Coyote Wells.

"Hold on!" barked Grubbs.

There was something about his voice that made everyone listen.

"I don't guess the little fellow had the badge on him when he came in."

Stumpy waved the badge and waxed furious. "You seen me take it from his pocket, didn't you? You seen me when I made—"

"Yep, I did. And I saw that long, scarfaced critter put it there, too."

The scarfaced man had edged away from the bar. He was crouched a trifle, his eyes like gray stone. His hands swung down, and the air of the room rocked with gunfire.

It seemed to Watney he was in the middle of it. He plunged forward to hands and knees, drawing his derringer as he went. He had a fleeting impression of the scarfaced man, a flaming gun in each hand, and another impression of him plunging forward.

He saw Whitey twisting and weaving like a weasel in the mix-up by the card table. Stumpy had hobbled to the front door without drawing a shot. He paused there, swinging on his one leg, raising the rifle to his shoulder. The rifle was aimed at Cole. Watney pointed the derringer and pressed both triggers. The slugs slammed Stumpy half around. His rifle discharged wildly as he went down. Watney thought he was dead, but the slugs had only stunned him. He crawled through the doors with

an awkward, wild flight like a duck on land.

ONE of the lamps was smashed by a wild bullet. A shotgun roared, and a second light went out. Phillips was shooting with his sawed-off double from behind the bar. He got the last lamp with the second barrel, and the place went dark.

Shooting stopped. Watney sat up, fumbling to reload his derringer, coughing from the acrid sting of powdersmoke which filled the air. Men were galloping their horses away down the street. He said something, and Cole answered right by his elbow,

"There's still a varmint or two around."

Grubbs' voice, "I got a gun in your middle, Phillips. All right, boys, let's have a light. There's a candle back of the bar."

It was half a minute before anyone could locate the candle. Its light revealed Grubbs near the dack door, his long-barrelled .41 pressed in Phillips' stomach.

"Never did like you, Phillips, so I can't say I was surprised to find you'd sold out your friends."

"Don't shoot!" wailed Phillips, gone sick from fear. "Blaise hired Stumpy and Whitey, I'll admit. But I didn't want to go along with 'em. They had the deadwood on me. They swore they'd take me out and turn me over to that Johnson county sheriff if I didn't—"

"How much did Blaise pay you?"

"Not a thing. I—"

A shot, a tinkle of glass, and Phillips slumped forward. He went down on all fours while Cole ran to the door. Cole fired, but the drygulcher was galloping his pony down the street.

"Compliments of Whitey," he said, coming back inside.

Phillips lay on the floor, his teeth clenched. Blood was running through his fingers as he held his side.

"Whitey!" he muttered. "That sneak. Sure. I'll tell. Blaise hired me. Paid three hundred. Three hundred dirty bucks. Wanted to clean out Diehard. Going to clean her out tonight. All hell break loose . . ."

Phillips lay back, breathing heavily. One of the "rustlers," a rancher who had been sheeped out by Blaise, started bandaging the wound. After a while he stopped and felt for a heartbeat. He got up. Phillips was dead.

They carried him over beside the still form of the scarfaced man. It was silent for a moment.

"That's the start of a collection," said Grubbs.

Somebody laughed, then stopped suddenly. They all listened to the thlot-thlot sound of an approaching horse. The hooves came up and slid to a halt in front of the saloon. It was "Wolfer Jack," a tall, flea-bitten old sidewinder in buckskin pants and moccasins. He slid over the rump of his bareback apalusa horse and hurried over the sidewalk leaving the Cree bridle drag.

"They's somethin' damned sidewise goin' on in this brush," he announced. His eyes fell on the dead men and he pulled up. "Had some trouble?"

"A little," snapped Grubbs. "What was it you had on your mind?"

"Why, half a dozen lads took over my shanty, and they got every kind of gun that can be carried on a hoss. I sneaked off without 'em spottin' me. Now, if you want my opinion—"

He stopped short as a rattle of rifle fire broke out near a cluster of cabins up the coulee.

Grubbs said, "Must be the Stinson boys tanglin' with the Blaise gang. Likely they're comin' from yonder way, too. Robertson, you sneak over to the dry wash and keep watch. Skegg, you and Idaho get out and fetch as many of the boys as hanker for Blaise hair. The rest of us better stay here. If she gets rough, I'd rather hold this old saloon than any dump in town. She's by herself, and them cottonwood logs will take plenty of lead."

A rifle made a spiteful sound from the river way. There was shooting up the coulee, too, and in the direction Robertson had gone. A light wavered up and became steadily brighter.

"Guess they set fire to the old livery barn," somebody said.

The barn was an ancient, two-story structure, dehydrated by the years, and it burned like pitch shavings. An old harness shop caught a minute later, and embers flew on billowing heat waves to catch the roofs of some shacks across the street. A

second fire broke out in another direction.

"That's the old Diamond G warehouse," remarked Grubbs. "Better look your last at Diehard, boys. She'll be a mite different in the mornin'."

FLAMES lit the front of the saloon like yellow dawn. The faces of the surrounding clay cutbanks wavered bright and dark as the fire spread. The shooting, which had died away, then broke out with concerted intensity. Watney stood by the door with his derringer.

Cole jerked him away. "Beggin' your pardon, seh, you'd made a heap worse target here on the floor. And by the way, here's an extra Winchester which will serve for the night's work better than that derringer you're holdin'. Let me show you some of its finer points."

Rifle slugs whined through the windows like enraged bees.

"You just move this lever down, seh, and then wheel it back up. But do it fast so the ca'tridge won't jam."

"The dirty cowards!" fumed Watney. "Hiding behind those burning buildings!"

"They won't for long. The saloon here is too far away to catch, so I reckon they'll have to show themselves."

The building across the way had been a hotel. Flames roared unhampered through it as they would through a heap of dry tumbleweeds. For a few minutes it was like a great torch, then it collapsed into a pile of embers with just one skeleton wall standing. Darkness crept in again, and with it, Blaise's gunhands started a cautious approach.

They came on their bellies beneath a covering fire from the coulee walls. Men crouched at every saloon window, waiting. Minute after minute passed without a pull of a trigger.

"Gosh all Jerusalem!" swore Mr. Watney who found the waiting difficult.

"Wish I'd brought my old Sharps," grumbled Wolfer Jack. "These knife edge sights ain't in it with a bead for night shootin'."

Back in the dark Cole hummed a fragment of range tune. Something about Sam Bass.

"What'll I do if he dies?" asked Watney unexpectedly.

"If who dies?"

"Stumpy."

"Why, seh, in this country, it's customary to carve a notch in your gun."

The report of a rifle split the air of the saloon. Wolfer Jack chuckled with satisfaction,

"One! They's always one man that likes to show off, and there he be!"

Watney should have been sickened by such talk, but he wasn't. Instead, a burning sensation of glee rose within him. His hand tightened on the grip of the Winchester and he stared out, trying to see beyond the embers, hoping to pick out a man for himself.

A bullet tinkled some of the remaining glass in the window by Watney's cheek, and a sliver of it burned the skin of his hand. He reached to pick it out, and his eye caught a movement not thirty paces away. He aimed and brought the object into his forward sight. The gun went off, knocking Watney backward. He hadn't intended to pull the trigger just then—he'd just been squeezing too hard. He picked himself up. Someone was yelping across the way.

"Score one for the tenderfoot!" Wolfer Jack raised up to congratulate Watney when something struck him. He went to the floor and lay cursing.

"Where you hit?" asked Grubbs.

"The varmints. They got my shootin' shoulder."

Jack cursed away a rustler who wanted to help him. He sat with his back against the wall, tearing strips from his ragged shirt for bandage. After tying himself up he wet his trigger finger and crouched by his window.

"Wagon!" said Grubbs.

They listened. A steady rattle of wheels came from down the road.

"What—?" started Watney.

Cole answered, his voice as velvet smooth as ever, "Why, they got an old wagon with the forward end planked. They'll come up the road pushin' it, I reckon, and it won't do much good to shoot at 'em."

"What'll we do?"

"Why, they'll have to stop somewhere, and when they do they'll have to come out from behind."

Watney peeped from the edge of the window and saw it coming, rattling and bounding at a good clip along the rough road-

way. It was guided by a lariat strung from the front wheels, and the men who guided and pushed it were protected by a solid wall of planks. Shadows cast by the burning buildings showed that eight or ten men were advancing in its cover.

Wolfer Jack fired at it on general principles.

"Save your powder," said Grubbs.

The wagon rattled close, veered a little to miss a hitchrack, smashed down an awning post, and finally stopped with one front wheel against the saloon sidewalk.

The men were so close Watney could hear their muttered exclamations and the drag of their clothing as they slid from behind the barricade. They appeared from both sides of the wagon in unison.

Watney fired blindly at the mass, but before he could pump another cartridge, two men drove in on him through the window. The room spun. It rocked with gunfire. Wolfer Jack was swinging his rifle, the barrel in his hands. Cole was backed to the middle of the room, his pistol pounding out streaks of flame.

It was all confusing to Watney as he staggered up. He knew he was going to die, but somehow he had ceased to care. He felt for his rifle and found it on the floor. By the light of the blazing store building he saw more men rushing the saloon. He aimed and fired, pumped and fired, again and again until the magazine was empty. The hammer fell with a barren snap, but it didn't make much difference. The men had all dug for cover.

Watney tried to stuff cartridges into the 30-30. All he had were snub-nosed forty-fours. Unmindful of the roaring struggle he tossed aside his rifle and loaded his derringer.

"That's me you're swingin' your rifle at!" Grubbs roared at Wolfer Jack.

Jack stopped with his rifle in mid air. The room was quiet. Blaise's men, those who were left, had leaped from the windows and were digging for the shadows.

Shooting slowed to an intermittent popping. The fires died down and men bound their wounds.

"Guess we fixed 'em for good that time," grinned the wolfer.

"Blaise don't fix up easy," growled Grubbs.

One of the rustlers pointed from a rear window, "There she comes!"

Whatever it was, he'd evidently been expecting it. It looked like a huge bonfire moving along the brow of the coulee wall. It paused for a while.

"Reckon that wagon's loaded with greasewood from the way she burns. Unless their aim's worse than I estimate, this spot's likely to get mighty warm."

With this statement of Cole's, the others mutely agreed.

The wagon moved downhill, slowly, light reflecting from its tires. The fire grew as the speed of the wagon was accelerated. It hit something and turned over, and the next instant it crashed the rear of the saloon, hurling blazing faggots.

Cole flung back a man trying to get out the front door.

"They'll pick us off like prairie dogs that-a-way. Use the back door. Right through the fire."

One after another they went out, and Mr. Watney, pulling down his hard hat and holding his breath, went, too. There was only a moment of the flames, then he found himself against the steep dirt wall of the coulee. Trigger Cole was waiting for him.

"There's some hosses yonder," said Cole, pointing to the shadow of a little draw. "Blaise will likely head for the bench to cut the herd to pieces. It's his last fling, what with the committee and U. S. marshals and all. We better get up there and drop a word in the boys' ear. And Grubbs, you'd better bring your lads and come, too. I wouldn't say Diehard would be too healthy after the sun comes up."

VI

THEY forked the horses without drawing a shot. It was cool, and unbelievably quiet riding the badland washes after the fires of Diehard.

"Dear me!" chuckled Watney as they climbed toward rimrock. "Wouldn't the boys back at the office have been surprised if they had seen me tonight?"

The herd was drawn in, bedded down, and a couple of the boys were riding the long circle, singing to the rhythmic beat of their horses' hooves. The rest were under tarps near the sagebrush fire, asleep. At one side, in the privacy of the chuck-

wagon shadow, was a little tepee tent where Lennie slept.

"Yippie-i-o! It's mawnin'!" shouted Cole through cupped hands.

The boys rolled out, grumbling, and looking for the dawn. Lennie emerged from her tent, winding her long hair into a knot beneath her sombrero. The light from the dying fire fell on her face, revealing the worried wrinkle between her eyebrows. She evidently suspected something was wrong.

"Trig!" she said, catching hold of Cole's stirrup. "What is it?"

"I'd just as soon you didn't call me that, Mis' Lennie. I been tryin' to get away from that 'Trigger' business for some time."

"*Cole* then."

"Just 'Marvin' if you don't mind. I like that name. It don't sound like the name of a gunman a-tall."

"Please! What's wrong?"

He thought it was her intuition. Then he noticed Wolfer Jack with his shoulder wrapped, and one of the wounded rustlers sagging in his saddle. It was pretty evident they had been in a fight.

"Why, I sure don't want to alarm you-all, but I'd guess Arapahoe or one of the boys should ride back to the ranch with you, Mis' Lennie. We just had some shootin' business with Blaise and a batch of his gunhandies, and I'd guess we was in for a bit more."

"Nobody's sending me away!" she flashed. "I'm bossing my own iron, and if Blaise comes around here he'll find out a Mace can shoot, too."

Cole was thoughtful. "If you put it that-a-way, Miss Lennie, I don't reckon there's much I can say."

Shipping from Diehard was now out of the question. There was only one move left—to drive back to the valley of the Tenderfoot.

It was a big herd and the sun was a couple hours above the horizon by the time it was moving across the wide, bench country. At mid-afternoon, Cole, who was riding point, was able to look down on the winding, green ribbon which marked the course of the stream. Eight or ten miles away were the roofs of the home ranch. In the other direction, glistening flat like polished steel, was the lake backed up by Blaise's dam. From one side, a spillway ditch wound like an uncoiled snake toward a natural prairie depression that was just beginning to fill with overflow water.

Cole pointed his quirt when Watney rode up, "It would taste mighty good, that water, comin' down across the home range."

Watney nodded.

"Now, seh, if we could manage to blast that dam . . . But that requires a certain commodity known as dynamite which we ain't got." He called Wolfer Jack over. "Know where a man could pick up a couple hundred pounds of dynamite between now and tomorrow night?"

"It might be I do," said Jack, and without wasting more breath he built himself a loop and picked himself a spare horse from the remuda. By the time the herd was kicking up dirt clouds from the hill down to Tenderfoot Creek, Jack was miles away, jogging long-legged in the saddle toward the Dry Ridge, a line of purple buttes forming the eastern border of Rimfire range.

A little muddy water lay in pools along the creek bed. It was enough for the day, and seepage might give a little more in the course of the night, and that would be the end.

"The legislators," drawled Cole, "had better get here—quick."

The herd bedded down that night at the home ranch. Extra guards rode circle, but everything was peaceful. In spite of his long hours without sleep, Mr. Watney spent a restless night. He was up with dawn, eating flapjacks and salt pork when he saw a puff of dust approaching along the prairie trail.

He called to Cole and pointed it out. Cole said,

"It ain't Blaise. There's only three or four men in that bunch."

Cole was right. Four horsemen swung down from the prairie trail and headed for the ranch house. In the lead was Sheriff Hank Penrose, and close on his heels were three deputies.

Penrose made his habitual movement of wiping his stringy, red moustache while he looked from one man to the other. Some of these were wanted men—men from Diehard—and it made him uncomfortable.

"I got a warrant," he said bluntly.

"For whom?" asked Watney.

"For Tom Grubbs, Lester Slane, and Jim Tobin."

Slane and Tobin were two of the Diehard "rustlers." Grubbs, hearing his name, put aside a tinplate of sidepork and slouched outside, fingering his tangle of black whiskers.

"What kind of nonsense you talkin', sheriff? What could a man o' my character be charged with?"

"With robbing the Bentville Territorial Bank."

"*Me?* Why, I'm innocent as a new-born lamb."

"Anyhow, I got a warrant." The sheriff moved around in his saddle, his eyes apprehensive. He had little relish for this task. He had no idea that Grubbs and the others would go peaceably, and it was a royal-flush cinch that he, Sheriff Hank Penrose, would not take them forceably. It was only a play to give a semblance of legality to Blaise's business, and now that he'd said his piece he was anxious to be away.

"Coming along?" he asked.

"They's twelve men here," chawed Grubbs. "Reckon if you're hankerin' to have me stand trial, this would be as good a place as Coyote Wells."

The sheriff muttered something, turned his horse with a jingle of bridle links, and started away. His three deputies, none of whom had uttered a word, followed him with their mounts.

"Imagine, accusin' *me* of robbin' a bank!" muttered Grubbs, returning to his salt pork. "Me, a man o' *my* reputation! Still, I'm some relieved he didn't bring up the subject of that Sage Creek coach."

About noon, the quiet air was startled by the rapid bark of rifle fire. Cole, who was making a trip up from the spring, put down his bucket to listen.

"That's it," he said.

"Blaise?" asked Watney.

"Blaise. This time fighting on the side of the law. It's pretty plain. The sheriff deputized the whole gang, and they're comin' down to put the sights on us for a gang of rustlers."

"Dear me!" said Watney, "what will be the legislature's response to that?"

"Why, I reckon they'll side with the winners. It's always easier that-a-way."

Two Diehard men galloped from up the creek. The taller of them, Lester Slane, said,

"Blaise with twenty. All itchin' to shoot."

A half-minute later, five men came into view along the prairie rim beyond the horse corrals.

"They've split," said Cole. "Reckon he aims to get us from three ways. Grubbs, you take a couple of your best riflemen and pick yourself some roosts in the barn loft. Arapahoe, you and Max high-tail it down to the lower corrals. Maybe you can keep 'em from usin' the creek bottoms for a fort. Tobin, you hold the root cellar out back . . ."

He stopped abruptly and looked at Lennie Mace. She was standing among the men, a 30-30 in the crook of her arm.

"Where do you want me?" she asked.

"Miss Lennie, I'd give eight hundred dollars, cash money, if you were a hundred miles away, but I guess that's just thinkin'."

"She's boss of the Block M," cackled Arapahoe.

Cole nodded. "And I reckon that gives her the right to shoot."

Slane started beating the glass from the windows. "I'd rather be hit by flying bullets than flying glass," he muttered.

THE five riders followed rimrock for a while, then they disappeared into a dry wash. For the next ten minutes there was no movement discernible anywhere. Then a bullet whisked the air where a windowpane had been and plunked into the wall. The rifle's report arrived half a second later, and by that they knew it had been fired from long range. Another bullet followed, and another. A little puff of white smoke could be seen from among some dark rocks just beneath the rim.

"Reckon he's tryin' to be conspicuous," said Cole.

A few seconds later, Grubbs and his men cut loose, and answering volleys came from the deep cut bed of the creek. It soon got too hot for Arapahoe and Max who could be seen crawling through the corrals.

After the first fury of shots, peace descended. Only a stray dozen bullets marred the quiet of afternoon. The house and barn stretched long shadows toward the creek, and the sun sank in a blaze of yellows,

reds and purples. It was every bit as excellent a sunset as Mr. Watney had viewed while crossing North Dakota, but he was in no mood to appreciate it at this particular moment.

Light hung in the sky for a long time. Twilight, and the rifles in the barn loft started popping again. Beyond the corrals and well out of range, men were riding in a compact group. They disappeared into the brush half a mile down the winding creek.

"Reckon this is it," said Cole.

Twilight thickened. It came that time of evening between light and dark when a man's eyes play tricks on him. A cowboy aimed from the ranchhouse, whipping a bullet at some imagined movement between the creek and the barn.

Suddenly a rip of rifle fire broke out from the bank of an old ditch not fifty paces away. Rifles whanged from the other direction—more rifles than any of them imagined Blaise had at his command. The boys in the ranch house yipped and pumped their Winchesters until the barrels grew too hot to hold. They were tossed aside for six-shooters, but Blaise's men crept closer.

Watney knew the shooting was futile. Nobody could get his sights on a gunflash.

"They're aiming to rush the house, aren't they?" he asked.

"Wouldn't be amazed, seh," Cole answered softly. He reached through the dark and found Lennie. She was kneeling by a window, firing a six-shooter.

"I ain't exactly the sentimental type," he said, "but I'd sure like to tell you how much I think of you."

"How much do you think of me?" she asked, her breath close against his cheek.

"Please! Don't make it any worse for me than it is. I only wish it could be different, that's all."

"Different! I think it's been—wonderful."

"You never can tell what'll please a woman."

He held her close for a while, and then he put her from him. He stood up, leaning against the log wall.

"A girl like you shouldn't have happened to a man named Trigger Cole," he said, a trace of the old smile in his voice. "Good women and fast pistols don't exactly go together."

WOLFER Jack rode until almost midnight then he paused in a juniper-filled hollow near the big, barren front of the Dry Ridge. Up there he could see a mining dump, and a little to one side of this, a prospector's shack. It was Charley Beek's place. Charley was a hardrock prospector and peaceful enough, but he didn't take much to snoopers. Charley pounded highgrade in a hand mortar, got the gold out with mercury and a rocker, and stored it beneath the floor of his shack. Or so folks said. The only ones who ever investigated were two men who now lay buried some place down the hillside.

So Wolfer Jack, who was not the suicide type, rolled up in a soogin beyond rifle range and took a sleep. He got up next morning when the smoke of a sagebrush fire was coming from Beek's stovepipe, and moseyed up the hill.

"Wolfin' hereabouts?" Beek asked.

"No." I'm lookin' for the loan of two hundred pounds of giant powder."

"What for?"

"To blow hell out of Tip Blaise.'

"For that," growled Beek, "I'd spot you a ton. There's six cases of forty per cent dynamite out in the dugout. Help yourself."

Wolfer Jack diamond-hitched two of the cases on his spare horse and drifted back toward the Rimfire. He could see the flat surface of the reservoir most of the time, but it was a long way off, and it was sundown before he dropped into a coulee three or four miles away.

The evening had a fine, crystal quality, and he could hear the intermittent racket of gunfire. He found the noise reassuring, and as twilight settled he drifted down the coulee until he was in sight of the dam.

It was about forty feet high at the middle, filling a narrow place where the Tenderfoot did considerable winding about. The coast seemed to be clear, but Jack was not in a hurry. Folks who were in too big a hurry sometimes ended up in boot hill. There was a heap of rocks above the dam where a good man with a 30-30 could make it lively, and there were some patches of buckrush that could hide an ambusher, too. Jack hunkered down in the shade of a sandrock boulder and scratched at some places where his fleas were itching him.

When deep dusk came he ran down his

picket rope, tightened up the cinches of his old rimfire saddle, and headed up the crooked bottom of the creek, leading the packhorse.

A gun ka-whanged somewhere up the draw, its bullet digging stones and sailing away with a hornet sound. Jack hadn't seen the flash, but he knew it was close. He flipped over and hit the dirt on all fours, cocking his rifle as he went. The two horses jackrabbited up the creek bed.

He crouched there, watching the horses and cursing. They stayed close together, lead rope whipping the ground. At the base of the dam the saddlehorse turned to the left, but the packhorse churned up through the unsettled earth. They hit the end of the lead rope and both of them went down.

"E-yow!" shouted Wolfer Jack expecting them both to be blown to glory, but the cases of powder just jumped the hitch and rolled on their corners to the bottom of the fill.

Jack crawled through earth and exposed roots as far up the cutbank side of the creek as he dared. It was almost night, but the spruce boxes were visible enough. He thoughtfully wet the forward sight of his Winchester, drew down, and let go.

The rifle's noise and recoil were lost in the roar that followed. Untamped though it was, the dynamite tore deeply into the earth fill. It sent a geyser of whitish gumbo toward the sky, and the shock of its concussion opened a crack from top to bottom. In a matter of seconds the deep creek bed became a swirling torrent.

The flood roared down out of the night, thick with debris that had gathered along the creek for a century. It snatched up the pole corrals and bore them away in its first flood. Men screamed in the dark and fled before it. Its first rush parted before the high ground where house and barn sat, but a few seconds later it rose and lapped across the floors.

All shooting had stopped. Grubbs and his two men hustled in from the barn.

"The worst of her is yet to come," he shouted. "Blaise and Whitey and that varmint Getchell sneaked into the barn, but they're welcome to it. The flood will make driftwood of her, and this house, too."

It was a pell-mell rush outside. Water rose rapidly over the sill logs. It was over

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Watney's shoes when he started splashing out with the rest—then he noticed the slim shadow of Trigger Cole roosted nonchalantly against the table.

"Come on, you young fool."

"Now, seh, is that any way to talk to your chief ramrod?"

"You'll be drowned."

"I reckon I can swim out if Blaise and them others down in the barn can do it."

"But Grubbs said—"

"I think I'll wait around. This is Blaise's final play, and I'd like handsome well to furnish him a bit of competition."

"Then I'll stay, too."

"But Lennie, she's out there, and—"

"That girl can take care of herself!" Then, as though Cole had disputed it, "You bet she can!"

Flood waters hung level with the window sills, but the house stood. The barn and bunkhouse were solid, too. After reaching a crest, the flood commenced rapidly to fall. In four or five minutes the knoll lay glistening beneath a rising crescent of moon.

Cole stepped to the door to inspect the cylinder of his pistol, then, without saying a word, he started toward the barn. When Mr. Watney ran to catch up, he spun around,

"You stay here!"

"No! I'm going. If a fellow puts on a man's pants, he has to measure up to them. I'm—"

"Seh, stay in this door and cover me with your Winchester."

Mr. Watney knelt at the door with his rifle ready. He could see every move Cole

made as he walked toward the barn. Fifty paces—it seemed an eternity. Every second Mr. Watney expected the air to be ripped by a rifle shot—but the silence held. There was only the swish of water as the creek returned to its bed, and now and then a distant shout.

Cole disappeared into the shadow of the barn, and Mr. Watney decided to breathe. There was the rattle of a home-made latch, the creak of a door opening. Silence. Half a minute of it. Then a pistol shot. Just one. Mr. Watney went a trifle sick to his stomach. He stood up, knees trembling, listening . . .

VII

COLE reached the shadow of the barn and stooped to enter the small door leading to the harness room. It was dark, the floor still puddled from the flood, the air filled with the musty odor of manure and rotting hay.

He was familiar with the barn, so he had no trouble finding his way in the dark. He walked through the harness room, felt his way around a few sacks of oats, and stepped to the passage running back to the stalls.

There was a box stall at his right. He groped for its door. The door had been closed that morning, but now it was open. He stood quite still. There was silence . . . then one tiny sound emerged. It was the rapid tick-tick, tick-tick of a watch. Not the dull sound of a cowboy's dollar ingersoll—it had the bright ring of many jewels.

He knew that Blaise was waiting for him, only a step or two away.

There was a movement. It was the kind a man senses rather than sees or hears. Cole drew back as a gunshot ripped the blackness.

The burning powder brushed Cole's arm. For a fraction of a second Blaise's handsome face was revealed. He was standing inside the box stall only a stride away. There was no time, no room for Cole to draw. He drove forward, collided with Blaise, and the two smashed against the manger. The gun, batted from Blaise's hand, clumped to the floor.

Cole was lighter, less powerful, but for the moment he held the upper hand. It was a matter of timing, a matter of balance.

He knew he must not let Blaise get him in his grip. It must not be made a contest of strength.

So, with the advantage still his, Cole twisted free. Blaise cursed. He flung out his mighty arms and charged forward, but Cole was not where he expected. He turned, groping. He was a hulking shadow there, against the deeper shadow of the wall. Cole could have drawn and killed him, but he didn't. He set his heels and swung a right hand blow with all the power of his whiplash muscles.

Blaise's head snapped. He backpeddled, and slammed against the plank side of the stall. He rebounded and plunged forward to his knees.

"Blaise!" the voice belonged to Getchell, the gorilla-armed man.

Getchell struck a match and tossed it, flaring, to the floor. It revealed him as a shadow against a far wall. A hunched, long-armed shadow. Grotesque. Cole knew his gorilla arms were swinging, palms open to receive the twin butts of his six-guns. The air rocked almost in unison with explosions, but Cole was one tick of a watch faster, and Getchell's two slugs rattled among the rafters of the barn. Cole's slug had drilled him a ticket to boot hill.

Instinct told Cole that Getchell had fallen. He had no time to see for himself in the fading match light. He spun to face Blaise. Blaise had located his gun and was coming up with it. There was a movement, a quick shaft of moonlight from an opening door. And someone in another direction, too. He saw Whitey, weaved in the open, gun drawn.

No time to tangle with both men. Whipsawed. There are seconds, yes, and fifths and tenths of seconds when men live through eternities of exploding thoughts.

A shot from an unexpected direction cut through Cole's momentary indecision. The bullet was not aimed at Whitey, but it startled him and threw him off. His bullet tore harmless splinters from the stall plank by Cole's cheek. He was running toward the door, and Cole let him go as he finished spinning to meet Blaise. But Blaise was slumping forward to the floor.

And then, darkness.

Watney's voice came from the harness room door. "I believe it's safe to scratch another match, Marvin."

Cole struck the match. He saw Watney there, holding his derringer, a slight trace of smoke drifting from its right-hand barrel. On the floor Blaise had been drilled through, but he still had life in him to moan.

"Reckon you saved my life, seh," said Cole.

"It's nothing."

"It's right important to me."

"I didn't mean that. I—Well, gosh all Jerusalem, this just about clears things up, doesn't it?"

"Yep. Whitey seems to have dusted the sagebrush, but you never quite get 'em all. It's the same with rattlers, there's always one that crawls away in the rocks." Cole looked down at Blaise who was slowly reviving. "I'm right glad you decided not to kill this critter. I want to see him behind bars. Bullets are too clean, too quick for this kind. They make heroes, sometimes, when folks look back. 'Died with his boots on,' and it has sort of a good sound. And that ain't right. A prison suit of gray, that's what his sort deserves. It makes 'em look cheap and no-account. Yep, Watney, I'm glad you aimed to wing him."

Watney cleared his throat. "Marvin."

"Seh?"

"I hate to admit this. But, the fact is, I *did* shoot to kill. Yes, indeed."

They found a bit of candle and lighted it. The door was flung open a moment later, and Lennie ran in. She saw Cole standing there, safe, and the next second her cheek was pressed against the front of his shirt.

"I'm so glad!" she wept.

Cole held her for a moment, then he stepped back, shaking his head.

"No, Lennie. You don't want me."

"I'm sorry. I thought—"

"Thought I cared about you? Believe me, there's nothing in the world I've wanted as much as you. A home with you, Lennie. But it can't be. Me, I'm Marvin Cole. But that's to you, and Mr. Watney, yonder. To most folks I'm Trigger Cole, and the two men are a heap different. I tried to leave Trigger Cole behind, in Texas, but it was no use. He followed me to Dodge City, and from there to Cheyenne, and then to Miles City, and here. Reckon he'll dog me to the end of my days. Think if you married me—every time I'd go to town you'd wonder if I was comin' back. I'd walk down the street, and folks would say, 'There's Trigger Cole.' And whenever some cheap gunslick got his snoot full of red-eye, he'd come huntin' me out, tryin' to add the big notch to his pistol. No, Lennie. I got to ride on. Maybe, if I ride far enough—"

Watney grabbed him, and whirled him around. "You," he said in an intense, wrathful voice, "are a damned fool!"

"Now, Mr. Watney, seh—"

Harvey P. Watney gestured with his derringer. "I hired you, and by heaven you're going to stay. If you try leaving here, I'll—"

"Put down that derringer, seh—"

"If you ride out of here, by heaven I'll shoot you from your horse. Yes, I will! Who are you that you should worry only about yourself? How about Lennie, and me? Don't we need you? You may be Trigger Cole, the gunman, but to me you're simply a coward."

"Now, seh—"

"Yes, a coward. Always on the run from yourself. Never willing to live down the reputation you've been saddled with."

Cole was thoughtful.

"Never looked at it just that-a-way," he admitted. "Nope, I never did. And maybe you're right. Maybe I better stick around for a little while." He looked at Lennie and a slow smile spread across his face. "Maybe for a whole heap of a while."

"Well, that's more like it," said Watney, putting away his derringer. "Yes, indeed!"

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DEALER'S CHOICE

By LEE E. WELLS

The fool kid had won a few dollars . . . and now he thought he could slap his brand on the whole world.

THE TWO MEN came to the end of the bar, within a hand's touch of Del Lancey. There was a pleased flush to Mat Craylor's high-angled face and excitement lifted his voice.

"Tell Steve I quit." He smoothed out the green bills that he had clutched tightly all the way from the dice table. He looked at them as though there had never been that much in his hands before.

"All you had was luck, Mat. Ride back to the Circle Bar while you've still got it."

Mat looked up, the sun-wrinkles deepening around his gray eyes. He was tall and his broad shoulders blotted out the light from the ceiling lamp, casting Del's face into shadow, toning down the coppery sheen of her hair.

She saw that he was just a big kid. He rocked back and forth on his booted feet in faint indecision. At last he shook his head and looked back toward the dice table. Bart Fleming rattled the cubes in a heavy leather cup as though losing three hundred dollars in three passes happened now and then and could be expected in a place like this.

Del wasn't quite sure why she spoke. She had been hostess in these border places long enough to know that most men got what was coming to them. It might have been his gray eyes, set wide apart and sparkling now. It might have been something in the set of his jaw and wide lips, or in his voice.

"Ride out, cowboy," she said quietly and the two men swung around. Out of the shadow, her lips had a cynical lift like a cupid's bow warped at one end. "The money's yours so long as you keep it in your pocket. Bart Fleming will be after it and he'll take your shirt and saddle besides."

Mat looked down at the bills again and then his eyes lifted to Del. There was nothing suspicious in them. He believed her to a certain extent, though the money seemed to give her the lie. She saw the shadows come and go, then the lips softened and smiled.

"You see," he said, "I've always been lucky even when Paw and me played for matches."

Del made a faint motion with her bare, white shoulders, up and down. "You're a fool, but it's your money, cowboy. Sorry I stepped in."

She moved away, walking toward the gaming tables. Mat turned slowly, following her with his eyes. She was a tall girl, yet half a head shorter than Mat. The spangled dress did things to her figure, tight across breasts and hips, and her long legs seemed even more slender in the black silk hose. Out of the high-heeled slippers, she'd lose another couple of inches.

"Who's that?" Mat asked his friend.

"Del Lancey. Mat, she's right. You don't know anything about gambling—like Bart Fleming. That man can make cards and dice do tricks."

Mat held up the money. "He didn't cheat me. You tell Steve I'm quitting. I've made over seven months' wages tonight alone."

"I'll tell Steve you're staying in Solita a couple of days. That way you got a job when you're broke again."

"Not a chance, I'm lucky," Mat smiled and turned to the bar. He shoved the bills in the pocket of his worn levis, but spread one out flat. He flashed a grin at the barkeep.

"This one's on Fleming. Make it good."

Bart Fleming came up beside him, a dark, knife-faced man with a geniality he could handle as he would a cloak. He dropped an arm on Mat's shoulders. His smile was a quick flick of the lips back from the teeth and then closed again. It didn't

Mat's colt was lined on Fleming's white shirt, just where the black string tie divided it.

light his dark face or the black eyes. Bart could never get a smile that high.

"I'll not buck you again with the bones, Mat. But how about a round of poker? You know some of the men."

"Anything you say," Mat laughed and turned with Fleming to the green-top tables.

Del Lancey stood just behind a pale-faced man who nervously riffled a deck. Mat recognized Cleary of the O-Bar and Jones, who owned a big spread in the hills. They could throw money on the table, lots of it. Fleming sensed Mat's hesitation and a black brow arched high.

"Too steep for your blood?"

"No," Mat shook his head. "No, I'm always lucky."

DEL steadily watched him as he sat down in a chair and leaned over to pull his money from his pocket. She said nothing and Mat avoided her. He looked around at the men as they edged closer to the table.

"Two regulars and a lamb," Cleary grunted. "Thought you was in Tucson, Hartley?"

The pale-faced man carelessly shrugged. "I've come to get even with Fleming."

"Blood game," Jones said and rubbed his jaw. "Well, I can drop out when you two start feuding."

It wasn't all quite clear to Mat. He had never seen Hartley before. Fleming broke a pack and passed the deck to Cleary. The ranched shuffled, offered for cut. He looked around the table and his glance checked at Mat.

"We'll make it easy the first pot," he said dryly. "Ante a blue."

Del Lancey moved from behind Hartley's chair. She circled the table and leaned over Mat's shoulder. He squared around, startled, and once more caught that crooked smile. She tapped his shoulder lightly with a long finger.

"Lamb," she said, and walked off.

She moved through the crowded room, pushing open a plain door at the rear and entered the "dressing room". Here Del and the other two girls could change from street clothes into the spangled short skirt that was the job's uniform. Or they could come here for a few moments to escape the thick smoke, talk and noise of the main room. Del sat down before a wavy mirror. She lit a cigarette and the reflection in the glass held her attention. She stared deep into her own green eyes, thinking of Mat Craylor.

She remembered the square set of his shoulders beneath the soft gray of the flannel shirt. She remembered the clean, open look of him. Del leaned both elbows on the ledge, hands framing her face. The fool kid, she thought, he has won a few dollars and thinks he can slap his brand on the whole world. It would do him good to lose, quickly and finally. She wondered why she worried about Mat Craylor. He was just another man who came to Solita, drank and gambled, then was gone. Smoke from her cigarette swirled into her eyes and the mood was gone. Del powdered her face, making hard, matter-of-fact slaps with the puff against her cheeks.

Mat won the first pot and he raked in the chips with a triumphant sweep of his arms. Hartley sat back, long fingers clicking his chips on their stack. Cleary passed the deck to Jones.

"How much did he get you for, Ace?" he asked. Hartley stirred.

"Plenty. I'll get it back tonight."

"Welcome if you can," Bart Fleming laughed.

The game went on and Mat won steadily. Ace Hartley did not play a good game. To him there was only Bart Fleming, and Hartley found himself whipped several times between Cleary, Jones and Mat. Mat soon knew that he sat in a grudge game, he could sense the steady tension build up across the table. Jones dripped out. Half an hour later, Cleary pushed back from the table and skipped two blue chips over to Fleming.

"Cash 'em, Bart. I never leave a game broke."

Mat had a big stack of chips in front of him. He felt cold and detached and saw Cleary as though at a distance. Hartley's white face showed a faint trace of strain around the set of the lips. Most of the saloon crowded around the table. Tobacco smoke lay in thick, turgid layers between the green table and the yellow-glowing lamp above it. Mat waited impatiently and his glance struck around the packed circle. He saw Del and his lips softened. He made a slight motion of his finger toward the

stack of chips, but her expression did not change.

Fleming shuffled the cards, cut and riffled them. He made swift circles of the table and the pasteboards dropped with quick rhythm before Mat. Hartley opened, Fleming raised, and Hartley came back, Mat meeting the bets. Fleming picked up the deck.

Mat took one to meet a flush, Hartley two. Fleming slapped a card down on his own hand and swept it up into his fist. Very slowly, Hartley folded the fan of his cards. His finger stabbed across the table.

"The kid and me," he said with careful precision, "divide the pot, Fleming. I don't stand still for second deals, and it'll be your last one."

His hand jumped upward and disappeared inside his black coat. When it jerked free, a small derringer was wrapped in his fist. Fleming was caught flat, unprepared, and there was no chance for him. Mat saw the round look of his eyes, for once wide open and staring. He held his cards a few inches above the table, frozen there. His mouth was open but no sound came out.

Mat moved instinctively. He came up from his chair, still bending over the table. One hand batted aside the derringer and it exploded with a sound that was sharp and flat, the bullet flying high and burying itself in the rafters. Mat's fist moved with the powerful hunch of his shoulders and swing of his arm. Hartley's head snapped back and he fell to one side out of his chair, sprawling along the sawdust floor.

Mat moved back, circled the table and bent over him. Men pressed in close, excited and angered, but Mat remained in the grip of the cold detachment he had felt at the table. His hands patted down Hartley's body, searching for weapons, but he found none. He picked up the man by the back of the coat collar and hauled him down a cleared aisle the crowd formed to the door. He came back a moment later.

Fleming sat in his chair, still staring. Cleary and Jones watched the gambler, their faces flat, their eyes telling nothing. Del Lancey stood to one side, searching Mat's face. He dropped into his chair.

"The cards are mixed up," he said. "Deal it over. It's you and me now."

Fleming swallowed and caught his breath, his glance lifting to the silent ring of watchers. He passed his hand over his face and his fingers toyed with the knot of his black string tie. The lamp light showed a small line of sweat drops the length of his upper lip.

"I don't know," he started and then stopped to clear his throat. "I don't know what come over Hartley."

"He thought you cheated," Mat said shortly. "Come on, play the hand out. Deal 'em."

Fleming fumbled at the cards and once more his eyes circled the silent crowd, resting momentarily on Cleary's beet red face. The rancher watched, silent and judging. Fleming licked his lips.

"Maybe you'd rather drop out," he suggested and it was difficult for him to form his words. "Things like this—"

"I'm satisfied," Mat said and tapped his chips. "You can see that."

Fleming dealt the hand, looked only momentarily at his cards. He pitched them into the center and came to his feet. "It's yours," he said. "I could only match an eight."

He walked away, not seeing Mat's broad smile as he dropped a pair of jacks face up. The men moved back from the table with an audible sigh. Cleary looked sharply at Mat as though ready to say something, but he changed his mind. Mat stacked his chips and cashed them in. Eagerness and triumph showed in his face. As he walked toward the door, he saw Del and he turned sharply her way.

"You brought me luck," he said.

"Angels and fools," she murmured, "need no luck. Wait until I change." She left him before he could answer, knowing that he would wait for her.

IT was not long before she left the saloon by the side door, walking down the dark passageway between it and the general store. Mat Craylor's cigarette glowed hotly in the shadows beneath the wooden canopy, arching high to the ground when he saw her and came striding up.

He fell in beside her and Del waited for him to speak first. She'd know then if she'd been right, if Mat Craylor was

just another man with wrong ideas or actually as open and clean-cut as he seemed to be.

Moonglow had dropped Solita into a world of silver. The wide street was an argent stream, adobe walls became lovely and smooth in the witchery of the night. Somewhere afar off, a coyote howled, the sound as thin and delicate as the moonlight itself. Del moved with a faint rustle of her long skirt and Mat checked his stride to match hers. They alternately walked in silver and in velvet strips of blackness, out into silver again. A breeze swept down from the high hills to the northwest, gently touched the swirl of hair that escaped from under Del's rakish hat.

Mat had plunged his hands deep in his levi pockets and kept them there. He didn't look at her, but she had the pleasing knowledge that he was very much aware that she walked beside him. He raised his head and took a deep breath.

"Smells good after all that smoke."

"Better get used to the smoke," she said. "You'll live in it the rest of your life."

"No," he shook his head, "not long. I ain't a professional and I don't want to become one. I could always win, I reckon, but gambling's no way to live."

"I've heard that before," she answered. He looked around, a sharp frown on his face. "What are you going to do with all that money?"

He grinned, shrugged, and then paced silently beside her. The frame rooming house where she lived was not far off. Mat freed his hand from his pocket and pointed toward the black upthrust of hills beyond the town.

"There's a place up there I got in mind. Upland meadows and a rich graze for horses. There's scrub timber and a couple of creeks where a man could fish. I aim to buy it."

"It takes a lot of money," Del said. Mat sobered and his hand jammed back in his pocket again. His swift smile returned and a new, eager tone came into his voice.

"I got a good start tonight. I aim to get more the same way. I'll have that horse ranch, and right soon. I'll raise fine stock and have myself a family."

"Oh, you have a girl?"

"No," Mat answered. "At forty and found no man's got a right to spark a girl when he cain't give her a home. But now I'll find her somewhere, now I got a good start toward that spread."

They stopped at the path that led up to the house. Del gave the windows a swift glance, half expecting to see the white blur of a curious face. Mat removed his broad-brimmed hat and the moonlight touched his deep-curled hair.

"How much did you win, Mat?" she asked.

"The game was steep and the pots were big," he answered. "I didn't take a full tally, but about five thousand."

"You've run some pocket change up to five thousand!"

"Sure," he chuckled. "It's my luck. Three hundred at the dice game. Cleary and Jones dropped considerable and Ace Hartley was so anxious to beat Fleming, he got careless with his bets. Of course, Bart lost a heap."

She touched his arm and the contact sent a warm tingle into her fingers. She sensed that he leaned toward her, then caught himself. He rolled the hat brim tightly in his powerful fingers. In an urgent rush of words, Del tried to drive home her advice.

"Mat, put that money in the bank. Get out of Solita and ride back to your job. Five thousand will give you a good start toward your ranch in the hills—and the kids. But if you stay in Solita, you'll lose it all."

"Why, it takes more'n five thousand," he said with a faint wonder in his voice. "I've got to have four times that. I can't quit now."

"Mat, Bart Fleming won't rest until he's won that back from you. He'll win, one way or another. Why did Ace Hartley start trouble?"

"Hartley saw something that wasn't there," Mat answered with a shrug. He peered down in her face, the earnest eyes and half parted lips. He laughed. "Why, you think Bart cheated! I won the pot, didn't I? And he didn't even show his cards the last hand."

"Mat, don't be a fool!" She leaned forward, her fingers tighter on his arm.

Suddenly he loomed close, looking down into her eyes. His arms were about her. She stiffened against him, trying to push

him away, but then his lips were on hers, firm and yet soft. The clean warmth of him enveloped her and she had no strength in her arms. He stepped back and took a deep breath.

"I'll tell you more about that spread someday," he said softly. He turned on his heel and strode away through the moonlight, back toward the heart of the town.

Del stood still, the tingle of him still on her lips, the feel of his arms still strong about her. She turned and walked toward the house, very slowly. In the shadow of the porch she stopped and her lips quirked up at one corner in a touch of anger.

"The fool," she said aloud. Her voice dropped and she half turned her head to stare in the direction he had taken. "Who's the fool, Del Lancey?" she whispered. "Who's the fool?"

When Del went to work late the next afternoon, she heard that Mat Craylor had ridden out of Solita. No one seemed to know where he had gone, though many thought they knew why. Bart Fleming was profanely certain of Mat's reasons.

"With all that money cached, he's scratching an itchy heel," Fleming growled at the bar. The evening trade had not as yet started and there was only Del, the bartender and Fleming.

"All cowboys want to drift and travel. Craylor won't have a dime left when he gets back. I figured to get him in a game tonight, but I reckon I can kiss that money good-bye."

Del drifted away to the evening's work. Despite the story that Mat had left Solita, she watched the swing doors, or her glance would idly circle the crowd at the tables and the bar. He didn't appear, so she knew definitely that he had left. She walked home alone through the bright moonlight. She remembered his swift kiss and the thought of it disturbed her.

She sat on the edge of her bed, looking out the window to the silent street. Her world was disturbed and her thoughts a turmoil. On impulse, hardly explainable even now, a word spoken, a bit of advice, she had intruded on someone's business not her own. A kiss, a pair of strong arms and the thing threatened to get out of hand. She cupped her chin, leaning her arms on the window sill.

She wondered where Mat Craylor could be. Del hoped he had taken her advice, that he had returned to his job, content with one brief turn of the wheel of chance. It would be better for her that way. She could go on, self-sufficient and assured. With a sigh, she sank back on the bed and in a few moments had drifted off to sleep.

THE days passed in scheduled monotony. The nights passed in routine noise, talk, smoke, and the click of chips like a drum rhythm under everything. For ten days Mat did not come back, and Del became more certain that he had returned to the life that was meant for him. It gave her a soft, warm feeling that she had done at least one constructive thing.

Then she saw him at the bar when she came to work one night. Fleming stood beside him, lips friendly, eyes cold. Del stopped short. Now that he was here again, she knew all along she had wanted to see him. But anger and chagrin tugged at her from another direction. He had come back for all her warning. He was already talking to Fleming, and that would lead to trouble. Mat turned, saw her, and straightened with an abruptness that caused Fleming to glance over his shoulder.

Mat came swiftly to her. "I been hoping you'd come early," he said. Del hoped her eyes were impersonal.

"I hoped you'd stay on the ranch. Couldn't you?"

"I ain't been working," Mat said. An eager light came in his gray eyes. "I been to Tucson and all around. I'll tell you about it."

Fleming came up, still smiling but he gave Del a definite, silent warning. "The lucky cowboy," he chuckled. "He's promised me a chance to get my money back, Del."

"It's his money—or yours," she shrugged and moved away. Fleming understood. His smile grew wider.

"You don't have to change right away, Del. Maybe Mat would like to see the town again."

"Could you?" Mat asked. His fingers touched her elbow and, without a word, she swung around, walking beside him out the doors and onto the street.

The night was soft, the evening still early, and they met many people on the

plank sidewalks, coming out of the stores. They left the last of the houses behind them, cutting away from the road. At last Del stopped and instantly Mat's arms went around her. She turned her head so that his lips only brushed her cheeks. She stepped back, dropping his hands.

"Hey?" he asked, hurt and surprise in his tone.

"I don't play that way," Del said quietly. He shoved his hands in his pockets and kicked at the dust with his boot toe.

"Play!" he said softly and seemed to test the sound of the word. He shook his head and a new note came, his voice dropping. "I've been lucky again, Del. I need just a little more and I'll have that ranch in the hills."

"Fine for you," she answered.

"Some I've met," he said quietly, "like to meet men with money to spend."

"I know, but count me out. You've been educated a little, Mat. Maybe it's good for you, maybe not. I liked you the way you were."

"That's why I come back. They've cheated on me, in Tucson and about. One tried to get his money back with a gun in a dark alley. He's not around any more. Girls have been sweet and cuddly."

"Nice?" she asked and managed to keep her voice level. In the darkness her hands were clenched. He considered the question for long minutes before he answered.

"Not particularly. I figure there's only two people that won't cheat me. One's you—the other's Bart. He's always given me a square game."

"Thanks," she said. "Bart can speak for himself. When are you quitting, Mat?"

"If the game is big—and I win—tonight. I need only a little more to get the ranch. Del, I been wanting to ask you—"

"I have funny ideas," she broke in and turned back toward the town. He matched her steps, hands still shoved in his pockets, his face dark and uncertain. "A man has to pay for all he gets and there's nothing to be had—free."

"Meaning?" his head jerked up.

"Just that and nothing more," she answered. She wished that she had the words to tell him how she felt. His plan to win money to buy his ranch was all right, she supposed. But yet it seemed that something was lacking, that it wasn't earned, that Mat would really never have a right to it. It would belong to the men whose money he had won. It didn't make sense, Del admitted. Everyone gambled. She stopped trying to analyze her thoughts, stopped seeking a way to explain.

"I think I understand," Mat said carefully. His full lips broke in a smile that held a world of cynicism. "Even you got a price brand. That leaves just one honest person—Bart Fleming—"

She gasped but Mat had lengthened his stride. She impulsively reached out to stop him then checked herself. Her hand dropped to her side. If he read her wrong, then he had no understanding in him and it was best this way. He had disappeared inside the saloon by the time she reached the door.

The place was crowded when she had changed into the short dress and came out again. Men lined the bar and most of the tables had already filled. Mat and Fleming sat at one, bottle and glasses between them, but no cards as yet. Del very carefully walked over to the bar, turning her back squarely to the table.

There had been nights when Del hardly had time to even glance at the tables. Not tonight. The bar gradually lost customers as the men sensed another of those heavy games in the making. They drifted around Mat, Fleming, and two other men who had started the session. Del went to the dressing room two or three times, smoking a cigarette with short, angry puffs, frowning at herself in the wavy mirror.

I'm acting like a kid, she thought. I'm letting him know that he can hurt me and that's no good. At last she crushed out her cigarette and opened the door. The crowd around the table hid Mat and Fleming. As she looked, one of the players pushed through the ring. He stopped near her, mopping sweat from his face.

"They cleaned me," he said and his laugh was a short bark. "It's a blood game and I walked right into it. Have a drink?"

"No, thanks," she answered and pushed by him. She edged into the crowd and finally stood at the table, behind the empty chair. The man across from her picked up his cards one by one, peering closely at them. A muscle twitched in his cheek. Fleming sat straight and self-assured. His long fingers flipped out cards and he raised

his hand in a signal.

"Two, Mat, and match these."

MAT gave him the cards, then took his own draw. He shoved out a stack of chips and his gray eyes lifted, resting briefly on her. She caught the bare flicker of expression and nothing more. She half turned to leave the table, checked.

Fleming won the pot and raked in the chips with a soft chuckle. The third man shoved back with a noisy scraping of his chair. He glared from Mat to Fleming.

"You keep whip-sawing," he growled. "You keep trying to break the other man and I get caught between you. Count me out."

"Thanks for your chips," Fleming said easily. The man mouthed a curse and cut through the crowd to the bar. Like water, the curious men closed the path behind him. Fleming dealt, fingers flying.

Mat glanced at the cards, frowned, and passed. Fleming opened and the betting grew high. Fleming won the pot. Mat could deal himself very little and put up no fight, and the deck passed back to Fleming. Del watched Mat's stack of chips grow lower.

She shifted her weight from one foot to the other. Mat leaned forward now, a touch of worry in his eyes, though he tried to keep his face impassive. He won on his own deal, but it was a small pot, Fleming refusing to meet the quick raise after the draw. For three hands neither man could open and Mat dealt again.

Del stirred restlessly. She remembered the way Mat had looked at her, hard and challenging, a touch contemptuous. Mat had won another small pot on his deal, but by now his chips were pitifully low. Fleming shuffled the cards. Del moved to Mat's side. Mat shifted in his chair and his fingers nervously touched the dwindling pile of chips. He didn't want Del near him, she knew that.

Fleming's fingers moved fast and he offered the deck for cut. Mat passed, as he had done all through the game. Fleming slapped the cards back and forth between them and Mat held his cards so that Del could not look down into the hand. In a swift flash of anger, she wondered why she bothered, but that passed. Mat opened and Fleming instantly started pushing up the bets.

Mat called for three cards. He moved them around face down before he picked them up one by one. Fleming glanced again at his hand, threw away a card and picked up the deck. He flipped a pasteboard down on his hand.

"Not that card, Bart," Del said quietly. "You take the top one, not the second."

Fleming froze and a suppressed gasp ran around the crowd. Mat looked up, startled, staring at Del as though he didn't quite believe her. Fleming's face went white, his spread fingers covering the hand he had been about to pick up.

"You're crazy, Del," he said in a low, choked voice. She shook her head and met his look square on.

"I know what I see, Bart. You took the second card."

Fleming came slowly to his feet. He took a deep breath and then suddenly his anger broke. "No one calls me a cheat!"

His hand jumped toward his coat at the shoulder. Mat came out of his chair and he flipped his cards into Fleming's face. Fleming stepped back, blinded for a second. His hand held a small gun. Mat jerked a heavy Colt from a bystander's holster and lined it on the white shirt, just where the black string tie divided it.

"Sit down, Bart," he snapped. Fleming acted for a moment as though he would meet the challenge of the levelled gun. Then he dropped the derringer and sank into his chair. Mat eyed him, cold and grim above the weapon.

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"The pot's mine, Bart, and no one would blame me for shooting you. You've been called."

Fleming licked his lips. "Take the pot," and looked down into the round dot of the gun barrel. Mat shook his head.

"No, Bart. It's my choice. Get a new deck."

In a strained silence someone edged to the table and threw a sealed deck onto the green top. Del had known fear when Fleming had tried to kill her and the backwash was still with her. She couldn't control her breathing. It was swift and shallow. Mat made a slight motion with the gun barrel.

"All your chips in the center, Bart. Everyone of them. Here's mine."

"They—don't match," Fleming said, hands spread on the table. Mat smiled and once more shifted the Colt.

"This makes it even, Bart. You're getting a chance. Break seal and shuffle the cards. Deal showdown."

Fleming stared at him, his black eyes growing wider. Mat spoke levelly. "You've got fast fingers, Bart. Make a crooked deal. Maybe I'll see you, maybe not. That's your gamble. My gamble's in the way the cards fall. Deal 'em, Bart."

Fleming groped for the deck and broke the seal. He shuffled, dropping three cards in his nervous haste. He scooped them up and shuffled again. He pushed the deck to the center. Mat cut, still holding the gun on Fleming's black tie.

THE gambler swallowed, looking around the sea of faces. He dealt the cards, hanging onto each one as though his life depended on it. They fell, face up, first to Mat and then to himself. A brief flicker of hope came in Fleming's eyes when the fourth card fell. He held jack high and Mat's top was a ten. Fleming turned the next card and it dropped Queen on Mat's hand. Fleming hesitated, slowly pulled off the next card. He turned it, held fascinated, then dropped it and slumped back in his chair—a deuce.

Mat raked in the chips with one hand and jerked his head toward the door. "You can leave when you want to, Bart."

Del caught her voice. "Mat—" she started and then checked at the cold light in his eyes.

"You were right," he said heavily. "Everyone's got his price. Everyone's got some trickery hidden in him. Glad you told me."

He moved away from the table and cashed in his chips. He shouldered his way out of the saloon and Del let him go. Now she could see that she had been a little foolish, acting by impulse, swayed by a kiss, touched by a clean thing in a young man's face, when she knew that contact with men like Bart Fleming would kill the fine eagerness and trust.

Del went into the dressing room and changed clothes. She arranged her hat and left the saloon. She started down the walk toward the rooming house, through silvery moonlight. She thought softly of Mat and then tried hard to put him out of her mind. His touch on her elbow made her swing around and look up into his face, touched with moonglow. She felt the weight of his eyes and knew he searched for words.

"There are all sorts of fools," he said slowly. "I'm one."

"No, Mat," she said with sudden contriteness. He made a slight gesture with his hand.

"I know what you meant, Del. A man can't have something for nothing. I got money now but I paid a price. I learned that men like Bart Fleming exist. I know that snap judgments can make bad mistakes. I figured myself a lucky man—a fool for luck."

"It won't last. I tried to tell you."

"In cards, no," he agreed. His fingers tightened around her hand. "I nearly discarded the Queen I needed to fill the hand."

"Mat, I—" His rush of words checked her.

"The ranch is waiting in the hills, Del. It'll be mine in the morning. I spoke of horses—and kids—and you asked me about the girl. I got her in mind. Will you?"

At that moment Del discovered, though she had learned many things, she had not learned this. Her answer came without words.

There are moments beyond speech and thought. This was one.

Sime Wakefield moved a big paw toward the chips.

LOCO ON THE LOOSE

By RICHARD BRISTER

Sometimes Big Matt felt he'd rather haze a thousand longhorns across a mile-wide river, single-handed, than make good his promise to ride herd on old Sam's spoiled brat.

MATT WEBB was sprawled back comfortably in one of Harley Wilkes' patent barber chairs, getting a haircut, when old Judge Barrows stuck his head in the door and barked: "Better get down to Stapleton's place right quick-like, Matt. Young Sam's goin' plumb crazy."

Matt straightened up like a man who's just put his weight down on a thorny cactus. The sudden move caught Harley Wilkes by surprise, and his snip-snipping scissors almost sheared off a piece of Matt's ear. "Tarnation!" the old barber grumbled. "Have a care, Matt."

Matt leaped out of the chair and went for his hat and guns. He followed dignified old Judge Barrows up the plank walk toward the Stapleton House bar at a half walk, half jog, inwardly cursing the day old Sam Peabody had made him promise to look after young Sam.

"What's the dang' young hellion up to now, Judge?" Matt grumbled. "Drinkin', gamblin', or fightin'?"

"Maybe all three by this time." The picturesque old lawyer's rickety legs were barely able to carry him along at the pace Matt was setting. His black town coat was flapping grotesquely against his lean hips, and he was puffing. "Kind of tough on you, Matt, playin' wet nurse to that irresponsible pup. Wonder you don't throw in your hand and let him fight his own way out of trouble."

Matt sighed, shrugging wide, lean shoulders within his bleached leather jacket. "Old Sam Peabody was the best friend I had in this world, Judge. You know that. Took me in when I was Injun-orphaned, taught me the ranchin' business from A to Z, till I wound up foreman out there at the SF spread, and me hardly more than into my twenties.

"Old Sam was all the real family I ever had, and when a man like that asks a favor,

in his deathbed, nobody but a hydrophobia skunk is gonna refuse, the way I see it. He told me to look after the kid, and as long as I can suck air in my lungs, I figger to do it, though I'm bound to admit I'm gettin' tarnation sick of the kid's carryin's-on."

They'd come up past the hardware and the combination post office - dry goods store now, to the Stapleton House. Matt hitched his belt up around his thin hips, pushed his hat back on his forehead, and shoved through the batwings of Luke Stapleton's bar.

His gray eyes swept the place in a flash, and came to rest on a quartet playing poker at a table over by the wall. Young Sam Peabody sat his chair in an attitude of sick tension, the way a man always sits when stakes are high, and the cards are falling against him.

He looked like a baby among grown-ups, Matt thought with disgust. The kid was twenty-three, but as old Sam's only child, he'd been brought up to think the world was his for a snap of his soft fingers. His face was pale and his thin lips had a girlish pout to them. He was pouting now. Looking at the faces of the other three at that poker table Matt Webb could well understand it.

Jus Carraway, red-bearded town bully was one. Sime Wakefield, the dude bank teller, sat across from him. And Jack Cordeley, the town's ne'er-do-well, a parasitic sidekick of Carraway's, completed the foursome.

It made Matt sore. Partly at the kid, for being dumb enough to sit in a game with three such patent no-goods. Mostly at the trio, who were obviously taking the pinch-faced young fool over the hurdles.

AS Matt walked up to the table, Carraway picked a bottle of Stapleton's rotgut rye off the floor alongside his chair, and poured two fingers of the amber liquid into Sam's glass.

There were glasses in front of the others, Matt saw, but the three never touched them. Only the kid was doing any real drinking. He reached out a wavering arm toward his glass, but Matt beat him to it.

"Howdy, kid." Matt held the glass up. "Health to you." He downed the burning raw stuff in one gulp.

The kid snapped: "They're servin' drinks at the bar, ain't they, Matt? What makes my glass so special that you gotta drink from it?"

The kid's left hand inclined forward a bit, revealing his hand to Sime Wakefield. The bank clerk almost broke himself in half trying to peek. Matt pretended not to see as he answered the spoiled kid.

"What makes your glass special? The fact you've a'ready had too many drinks from it. Move forward a mite, kid. You're makin' it tough on friend Wakefield."

Wakefield jerked back, his sallow cheeks flushing bright scarlet, but the kid was too bleary-eyed to notice the motion, or even to read the deep signs of embarrassment written in the bank man's features.

Jus Carraway stroked his bush of red beard and stared up at Matt coldly from his small, gray-green eyes. "We was havin' a nice, friendly little party, Matt, till you come hornin' in. I don't like people hornin' in when I'm playin' poker. I ain't used to it."

"Get used to it, Carraway. Look, kid, how much has this nice, friendly little party cost us so far? The SP isn't a gold mine, dammit!"

"*Us?*" young Sam said peevishly. "You mean *me*, Matt. I own the ranch. You're only fore—"

"And I run it," Matt said wearily. "A few more of these nice, friendly little clipping bees and there won't be anything left to run. Your dad told me, too—"

"I don't care what Pop told you." The kid had his pride. He didn't like Matt to ride too close a herd on him in public. It made him look silly. "You're takin' orders from me now, Matt. And I'm gettin' plenty fed up with the way you keep tryin' to run my whole life."

"That's tellin' him, kid," Jus Carraway grinned.

Matt Webb groaned. Sometimes he felt that he'd rather haze one thousand head of longhorns across a mile-wide river, single-handed, than make good his promise to ride herd on old Sam's spoiled kid. If he were free to get tough, he'd knock some sense into the kid's head in no time. But he had to go easy. The kid could fire him right off the ranch, if Matt went too far with him. If that ever happened, the kid

would go hog-wild, without Matt there to check-rein him.

Matt couldn't risk that. He had a long streak of loyalty in him. He had promised old Sam he'd look out for this spoiled young pup, and the ranch. Old Sam had treated Matt right as rain, and Matt couldn't go back on that promise.

"Come on, kid, let's line out for the ranch," Matt said wearily.

"Don't call me 'kid,' Matt. You ain't so tarnation old your ownself. . . . Line out yourself, if you're minded that way. I'm stayin'. I've lost a couple hundred that I mean to win back, and—"

"That," Matt said wearily, "was just what I figgered."

Across the table, Jus Carraway bristled visibly. His gray-green eyes flashed angrily at Matt. "Lissen . . . you tryin' t' hint we been card slickin' young Sam, are ya, Webb?"

Matt ignored the red-bearded giant. "Come on, Sam."

The kid stared straight down at the rickety card table. "Not me. I ain't budging."

Matt sighed. He picked a spot on the side of the kid's chin where a small brown mole high-lighted a perfect target. He did not hit the kid hard. But his hurtling fist landed squarely, and most of Matt's stocky weight was behind it.

Young Sam Peabody's head snapped to one side as if his neck had been broken. He groaned, then went completely limp, as his slender body slid off the chair and thudded onto the sawdust-covered floor.

Matt counted the stacks of red, white and blue chips in front of the kid's place at the table. He shoved them across to the pimply-faced dude and said coldly, "Let's see the cash for them chips, Wakefield. And move sharp about it."

Sime Wakefield was frightened. He counted out the money with practiced fingers. Matt stuffed the currency in his Levis pockets, hoisted the inert frame of the kid over one shoulder, and stared disgustedly at the grim-faced trio.

"Reckon it's right mean of me, ain't it, takin' the lamb away from the wolves? Well, I'm servin' notice. The next time I catch you three sidewinders shearin' the kid of his pop's hard-earned dollars—"

"Lissen," Carraway roared, "if you're huntin' trouble, Webb, you come to the right place for it. You can't call *me* a cardslick an' get away with it."

Matt screwed his face into a grimace of utter disgust. "Can't I?" He turned his head and spat elaborately on the floor at the man's feet. Then he turned and marched out of the place, toting young Peabody's limp figure like a sack of flour.

He flung the kid over the horn of his saddle, and supported him there.

THE kid came to after a mile or two of slow jogging. First he got very sick. Then he spent a few minutes gagging for air, dragging deep breaths into his poisoned lungs. The minute he began to feel better, he started to hurl invectives at Matt.

"I'm gettin' dang' tired of you messin' in where you ain't wanted, Matt. I don't give a hoot what Pop made you promise. You got no right to hit me. I had thirty dollars in chips on the—"

"I cashed 'em for you, kid. Money's right here in my pocket."

"That don't mean nothin'. I was down more'n two hundred an' fifty, when you come messin' in. Man can't go on losin' forever. I'd've won that back, if you'd—"

"Why don't you use your brain, kid? You didn't lose that money. It was stolen from you."

"They *wasn't* cheatin'!" the kid flared peevishly. "I was watching 'em careful, all evenin'."

"You were drunk."

"Now, you listen here, Matt. I don't have to take this from you, hear? Mebbe you're bigger an' stronger'n I am. But I own the SP, don't forget. I can fire you any time I take the notion. An' I'll do it."

"No you won't, kid. It's a big spread. I grew up on it, and learned the business by heart, while you were off at those ritzy schools back east. You'd be a year, findin' another foreman who knows the business like I do, and another year waitin' for him to turn any decent kind of profit, like I'm turnin' for you. . . . You couldn't stand that kind of lean pickin's, kid. Not with your spendin' habits."

Part was true, and part was bluff. Some day the kid would realize it, and Matt's jig would be up. But right now the kid

still believed Matt's tale of indispensability. He changed his gruff tone, started whining: "Hell, Matt, I know you mean to do right. You're just too high-handed. I don't mean no real harm, with my wild-cattin' an' gamblin'. It's just—the ranch is so blame dull, an' then when I get up to town. . . . I'm young, Matt. I got too much starch in my system to sit around and wait for the grave, like you do."

"Ridin' fence'd take some o' the starch out, mebbe. Or bustin' broncs. Or—"

"I'm no common hand," the kid snorted. "I'm the owner."

"You'll be the owner of nothin'," Matt said caustically, "if you don't quit gamblin' away the ranch profits with those no-'counts in Stapleton's. . . . An' what's so blame dull about the ranch, while we're on the subject?"

"What isn't? No cards. No drinkin'. No—"

"Your pop ruled out the booze an' the pasteboards forty years ago, kid, when he started the SP. There ain't a self-respecting rancher in the state that allows gamblin' an' booze in his bunkhouse. As long as I'm foreman, you ain't gonna turn the old SP into a barroom."

"Well—but a little gamblin' up at the ranchhouse, nights — that wouldn't hurt noth—"

"No," Matt said flatly.

The kid shrugged. "All right, then. Long as you're gonna blackball a few harmless hands of stud at the ranch, I'll just have to look for my fun up in town. It ain't my fault, Matt. You got to act like a king, bein' foreman. You ain't giving me any choice in the matter."

Matt felt gall rise in him. The kid was as cantankerous as a ten-year-old. It made quite a problem. If he kept sitting in stud games with those town wolves they'd pluck him clean as a daisy. He had no card sense to speak of—and little sense at all, for that matter but he was a plunging bettor. If he kept it up he'd get more and more reckless. Sooner or later those cardslicks at town would win the whole ranch from him.

The whole ranch. The thought set wheels within Matt's head in motion. He frowned thoughtfully for a brief moment, then suddenly chuckled, having reached a decision.

"Looks like you've got me plumb cornered, kid. I swore to your pop on a Bible I'd see you kept outta trouble. Can't be followin' you up to town every night in the week, I don't reckon."

"Then—" the kid's voice sounded surprised and pleased "—we can play some stud out at the ranchhouse from now on?"

"Sure," Matt said softly. "Don't reckon it's gonna start any earthquake out there. Might even set in for a hand or two with you myself. I never been known to run from a stud game, durin' off hours."

He wore a thin smile of anticipation, but the moon had dipped behind a cloud, so the kid couldn't see the triumphant grin that swept over Matt's weathered features.

ART TRAFCO was a small man with a twitching face, nervous hands, and a disfiguring scar running down one side of his bristly chin. He had come west as a tinhorn gambler, and the scar was a memento of a fight over cards. The fight had so thoroughly frightened the little fellow that he had given up gambling, and taken a job as a man-of-all-work around the SP home ranch.

He stared at Matt now and said, gulping, "Sure, I could still cold deck the cards, if I wanted to. You don't forget those tricks overnight, once you've learned 'em. But I'm through with cards, Matt. I've had my fill—"

"Maybe not," Matt told him.

"What?"

"The kid wants to run a stud game in the ranch, instead of runnin' up to town, Art. I decided to let him go ahead, if he wants to. He'd lose this whole outfit to those sharpers in town, if he kept goin' up there. And I got a promise to keep with his father." Matt smiled. "I was just thinkin'. The kid'll sober down some, when he's older. If there was only some way to hold the ranch in trust for him, for a couple of years . . . but there isn't. He owns it all legal. Old Judge Barows executed the will, and he gave me the inside of that part."

"What're you gettin' at, Matt?"

"I figure this is the chance I been waitin' for, Art. If *I* owned the ranch for a year or so, I could maybe crack down on the kid and make a man of him, like old Sam wanted. Then—when he showed signs of

gettin' some hoss sense, give it back to him."

Trafco was way ahead of him. "I get it. The kid's a plunger. You figure to get him het up in a game of stud, and work him to the point where he'll put up the whole ranch on a turn of the cards. And you want me in to make sure the cards fall right for you."

"It's wild," Matt nodded. "But it's a chance to save that fool kid from himself, the way I look at it. And I've got a few thousands saved up, to start that little game with. Couple o' big hands, in a no-limit game, would clean the kid till he'd have to put the ranch up or quit. And he don't know how to back away from his hard luck, when he's playin' stud poker. . . . So with you cold-deckin' the deals, it'd be easy done, Art, the way I look at it."

The little man shook his head doggedly. "I'm through with the—"

"It'll mean all our jobs here," Matt persuaded. "The kid's throwin' everything his pop left him down the drain, like he was just achin' to wind up broke. Sure, you'll be dealin' the cards dishonest. But it'll be for the best interests of all concerned. Includin' that spoiled brat of a kid. It's just a rigged-up scheme to put what his pop left in trust for him, is all. . . . Come on, Art. You gotta say you'll do it."

"He knows I was a tinhorn. He'll suspect—"

"That kid! He couldn't see a thief steal his horse in broad daylight. He's that dumb and trustful."

"We-e-ell." Art Trafco ran the tip of his index finger along the deep knife scar on his chin. There was a bright glitter in his dark eyes, as if the thought of handling the cards again appealed to him strongly, but still he looked doubtful. "It's a dangerous set-up, Matt. But like you say, it's for the good of everybody concer—"

"You'll do it?" Matt asked tensely.

"I'll do it," the ex-tinhorn nodded soberly.

They were standing in the gloom of the bunkhouse, completely alone, Matt had thought, but now some sharpened sixth sense warned him of an alien presence. Without seeming to, he let his eyes drift down to the half-opened doorway. He was just in time to see the kid's snooping head snake back out of sight, and to hear a muted sound of rubbing, as the kid brushed the bunkhouse wall, outside there.

Matt swore. It was just like the kid, to be eavesdropping. How much had he heard? Not much, probably, because Matt and Trafco had kept their voices toned down almost to a whisper. Matt had a thought. He grabbed Trafco by the front of his worn leather vest, and used the flat of his free hand on the ex-gambler's swarthy cheeks.

"You sneakin', thievin' coyote!"

"Sa-a-ay." Trafco cringed back, bug-eyed. "What the—"

Matt cuffed him again, not hard, but with enough force to send the little man sprawling. "If I owned this ranch," Matt snapped out loudly, "I'd send you packin' so quick you'd think you'd lit on a swarm of hornets, Trafco."

The little man was startled by Matt's sudden change. He couldn't even begin to understand. He knew that his cheeks were burning though, where Matt had hit him. And Trafco had a lot of temperamental Latin blood in him. He scrambled to his feet, grabbed up a crude home-made chair, and came snarling at Matt, the chair in front of him.

"I don't know what your play is," he snarled. "But by damn, you can't punch me around and—"

Matt stepped forward. Trafco swung the chair. Matt put his arm out for a shield, but only managed to break the blow partly. The chair hit him atop the head. It was partly cushioned by his hat, but it still knocked him down. He felt kind of dizzy, getting back to his feet. Then he heard the kid storming into the bunkhouse behind him, and he gritted in a harsh whisper to Trafco.

"The kid was listenin' out there, Art. Don't know how much he heard. Let me do the talking."

Young Sam Peabody strode up to them, snapping peevishly, "what's goin' on here, Matt? Has Trafco been up to somethin'?"

Matt stared straight at the kid, and lied glibly, "I never liked him. Or trusted him either, for that matter. Caught him goin' through Horse Johnson's stuff . . . and if there's one thing I don't mean t'

put up with, it's a thief in the bunkhouse."

"What was he after?"

Matt winked slyly at Trafco, said, "Tobacco, he claims. He says Horse told him he could take it, but—"

The kid looked at Trafco. "Is that true, Trafco?"

Trafco had the lightning brain of a tinhorn. "That's right. Horse said any time . . . but Matt here—"

"You're too hard," young Sam chided. "You're too tough, Matt. This wasn't worth starting a fight over."

"It's the principle of it," Matt scowled. He was watching the kid's eyes, trying to read the thoughts that lay just behind them. Something told him the kid wasn't fooled. But young Sam couldn't have heard too much of what had been said, before Matt staged the fake battle with Trafco. And it had been a realistic brawl, while it lasted.

No, the kid wouldn't suspect Matt and Trafco of working together after this little set-to, Matt figured.

THE next night, he wondered about that, as he watched three riders cantering across the plain toward the ranchhouse, coming from town. He squinted, and made them out when they were still a half-mile away. Jus Carraway, Sime Wakefield, and Jack Cordeley!

Matt turned disgusted eyes on the kid. "What's bringin' them three coyotes out here?"

The kid smiled blandly. "My invitation."

"You mean—t' play stud? You invited them three cardslickin' jaspers out here to cheat you in your own house?"

"You're talkin' about my friends, Matt. So watch your—"

"Friends! *Friends?* Dammit, kid—"

"You're getting a little off your range, Matt. You're bossing the spread. I'm bossing myself, and the house. I'll choose my own guests, if it's all the same to you?"

Matt shrugged hopelessly. "I figured these stud games'd be for whoever happened to be in off the range. For the SP boys, exclusive. If I'd figgered you was goin' t' invite them skunks out here, I'd never've given the go-ahead to it."

There was a secretive smile on the kid's face. It worried Matt. Maybe the kid *had* heard him and Trafco making their plans, out there in the bunkhouse. Maybe that red herring sham fight Matt staged hadn't fooled the kid for a minute. Even slow-witted youngsters like the kid have occasional flashes of cunning. He still thought of Carraway, Wakefield, and Cordeley as his friends—though how he could was a wonder to Matt—and he might have wanted them out here to forestall any play Matt and Trafco had cooked up between them.

Matt swore at the ironic hopelessness of the situation. In trying to help the kid, trying to keep his faith with old Sam, he had simply smoothed the way for the trio of wolves from town. The kid had a bad case of gambling fever already. He was getting in deeper each time he played, becoming more and more of a plunger. Carraway's bunch would skin him clean, in a coupla more sessions.

Matt fingered his guns. He could drive them off by force, if he took a mind to. But the kid would never stand for it. He'd fire matt, sure, and Matt would lose all control over the rambunctious youngster.

As the three rode up and dismounted, Matt looked them over; big Jus, with his bushy red beard, his born bully's swagger—Sime Wakefield, the bank clerk in his dude town clothes—Jack Cordeley, ragged, unwashed, the town loafer.

Jus tied his huge gray gelding to the hitch post and swaggered up the flagstone path toward the ranchhouse gallery, where young Sam and Matt stood waiting.

"Howdy, Sam," the giant nodded at the kid, then nodded in Matt's direction. "He playin' t'night, too?"

Matt knew he wouldn't be wanted. But he had made up his mind, and it gave him a small thrust of pleasure to let Carraway know it was not going to be as easy pickings tonight as the big fellow had anticipated.

"I'll be sittin' in, Jus," he announced firmly. "Mebbe a little later." He turned his back on the group abruptly, and went in search of Art Trafco.

"Tonight's the night," he told the little man-of-all-work when he found him pitching shoes with the cook, out back of the bunkhouse. "I'm goin' to town. Be back

in an hour. Gonna invite old Judge Barrows to our little party. He never turned his back on a game o' stud poker."

Trafco fingered the scar on his chin. "What d'ya want the judge in it for?"

"Witness, mostly. And if we can get that fool kid steamed up to the point where he'll lay the whole ranch on the line, it'll help some, havin' a trained lawyer handy. Kinda make everything legal."

Trafco's face twitched nervously, and his slender hands jerked with excitement. "Listen, I don't like it. With them three from town playin'—"

"What three?" Matt said sharply. From in back of the bunkhouse, Trafco could not have seen the three ride in from town. Apparently Trafco had known the three would be coming tonight, and had carefully guarded that bit of information. "How'd you know Carraway was bringin' his bunch in?"

"I—uh—I didn't, Matt. I—I just seen 'em ride in, is all. Heard their horses and took a peek around the side of the bunkhouse."

Matt thought he was lying, but couldn't be certain. He didn't trust this shifty-eyed little ex-tinhorn all the way, but he had to trust somebody, he reasoned. He needed Trafco tonight. Needed his expert dealer's hands even more badly.

"All right, Art. You better cut yourself into the game before I come back with the judge. Wouldn't look good for me an' you to sit in together. The kid still thinks we're holdin' hard feelin's. We'd best let him go on thinkin' like that, till this night's job is finished. . . . Got money?"

"A—about fifty dollars."

Matt smiled. "That oughtta do a man that's made his livin' at gamblin'. But go easy on the sleight-of-hand till you're sure of yourself, Art. Them three wolves from town ain't as blind as that fool kid is."

Matt pushed his mount hard on the trip to town. He found old Judge Barrows in Stapleton's bar. The old man's eyes glittered eagerly at the chance to sit in a high-stakes game out at the SP ranchhouse. They rode a fast clip out of town, the silver-haired oldtimer's coattails flapping in the breeze of his gentle mare's loping movement.

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A mile from the ranchhouse, Matt suddenly clucked to his own horse, and pulled on the reins. He sat quiet, in an attitude of attention, while the judge stared curiously at him.

"What's up, Matt? Hear somethin', didja?"

"Seemed like a gunshot," Matt announced tensely. "Seemed to come from the SP. *There!* . . . There goes another. Come on. Let's fan the breeze, Judge. Sounds like trouble up yonder."

Matt swung his mount wide of the trail, to approach the house from the protective concealment of the low rambling bunkhouse. He swung down and peered doubtfully at the house, around one corner of the frame building, and the puffing oldster crouched, panting, behind him.

The inside of the house was a glare of bright light, from the big oil lamps. Matt's green-gray eyes took in the whole scene in a fleeting glance. Some trouble must have flared up in the stud game in the big parlor because, through the wide kitchen window, Matt could see wiry little Art Trafco barricading the connecting door between those two rooms.

The little ex-tinhorn looked white as a sheet. Matt could see a red patch of blood on Trafco's shirt, at even this distance. He'd plainly been shot, and he acted scared silly.

THE minute he had a kitchen chair wedged against the living-room door, he lit out through the pantry like a frightened rabbit. He was hobbling toward the bunkhouse as fast as his rickety legs would take him, when a slouching figure suddenly stepped from behind a big elm, and

lined up a big Colt's six-shooter on the frightened tinhorn.

Matt strained his eyes and made the figure out to be Jack Cordeley, Jus Carraway's constant shadow. His lips hardened and he slapped a hand to his holstered six, growling. Trafco wasn't armed, and Jack Cordeley meant to blast him down without giving him a Chinaman's chance for his life.

Matt's aim was true, and the luck was with him. His slug hit Cordeley and knocked him down, screaming and gurgling. But not before Cordeley got his own slug into Art Trafco. The ex-tinhorn was hit, and hit hard. He came crawling toward the bunkhouse, moaning, making panicky animal noises.

Matt said tersely, "Snake around into the bunkhouse, Judge. There's some spare artillery in back of the door. Looks like we're in for more'n a stud game." He ran to Trafco in a low crouch, lifted the man, and hobbled back toward the bunkhouse with him. He was almost there when a flicking glance backward showed him the massive frame of Jus Carraway storming out of the house. Carraway saw him, yanked out a gun, and sent two slugs whistling over Matt's head before he reached the relative safety of the bunkhouse with his limp human burden.

The Judge had a pair of guns tucked in his pants. He slammed the door shut and bolted it, while Matt gently set Trafco down on a bunk.

The tinhorn's face was ghostly pale, and his eyes were scary-looking as those of a rabbit. "I'm—I'm done, Matt. They—got me."

Matt loosed his belt and said tensely, "Talk fast, Art. What happened?"

The little man spoke in a whisper. "I—I was gonna cross you, Matt. I shouldn't. . . . I—I took Jus aside and made a deal with him. I was gonna throw the cards in his lap an'—an' let *him* win the ranch. He—he said he'd pay me five thousand. Only—"

"Take it easy." Matt scowled. He'd been right, in not quite trusting Trafco. Once a tinhorn, always a tinhorn. Trafco'd seen a chance for some easy money, and couldn't resist it. Why sell his skill with cards to Matt for nothing, when he could get big money from Carraway, was the way he'd figured.

"You fool!" Matt grumbled. "You must've known I'd gun for you, if—"

"Jus — said — he'd take care — of you, Matt. But instead—he—he—"

"He took care of you. Sure. How'd he manage it, Trafco?"

"After he—won the ranch—he—"

"You mean he's got it already?" Matt stormed. Well, sure, that was Jus Carraway's plan, from the very beginning. The big red-bearded man was nothing if not an opportunist. He'd had a bottle in his foot when he'd walked into the ranchhouse, Matt recalled grimly. Probably plied the kid with all the drinks he could hold, worked on the kid's fool pride to jack up the stakes, and then used Trafco's crooked deal to insure success, when he'd finally got that dumb-headed drunk kid to put the ranch up in a sky-limit pot. It was an oft-told tale in this part of the country, where five minutes of the gambling fever could turn a sane man into a gibbering monkey. "Was the kid drinkin' much?" Matt asked sourly.

"He sure wasn't sober," Trafco whispered.

"So," Matt encouraged, "after Jus won the ranch—"

"Tht kid sat around—sulkin'. Rest of us kept—on playin'. Jus took—a fit—all of a sudden—swore I was cheatin'. Rared up—and put a slug in—in my shoulder. I—I run out through—the—the kitchen. Guess—you—seen the—the rest." The gambler smiled twistedly, and his voice trailed to a bitter trace of a whisper. "Funny thing is—I—I *wasn't* cheatin'—not when Jus plugged me. I—" He gurgled, his body tensed, then he lay motionless.

Matt had seen men die. He took down a blanket off the wall rack and pulled it over the limp body of Art Trafco.

He saw the judge peering through a crack in the wall at the ranchhouse. "What's goin' on over there, Judge? We're in a pretty raw spot, in case you don't know it. Jus Carraway saw—"

"He's just sent the kid off to town on some kind of an errand."

"Holy sufferin' Jehosaphat, Judge. Stop him! Yell to him!"

Matt ran to the window, cupping his hands for a yell at the kid, but the judge

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said, "No use, Matt. The kid's been on his way some minutes, an' ridin' like crazy. He'll never hear you."

Matt felt his stomach turn sour with fear. He yelled toward the ranchhouse, "What's your game, Carraway?" But even before the red-haired man's mocking voice boomed back at him, he knew the answer.

"Jig's up for you, Webb. I sent the kid into town for a doctor, to fix Jack up. Jack's dead a'ready, but the kid don't know it." Anything, Matt thought grimly, to get the kid out of the way. Then Jus Carraway's voice went on booming. "There ain't but the front an' back door to that bunkhouse, Webb. An' me an' Sime's got 'em both covered. You know any prayers, you better quick say 'em."

The judge stared at Matt queerly. "He means to kill us?"

"He probably doesn't even know you're in here, Judge. But he saw me, and he'll kill me, if he can find a way to do it. He knows I've had a chance to talk to Art Trafco. I know how he just happened to win the kid's ranch."

Matt lifted his voice toward the shadows from which Carraway's taunting voice had come to him. "You can't get away with this, Jus. If I'm found dead, the kid'll know blame well who beefed me."

"He's gonna think Trafco done it." Carraway was laughing. "We ain't dumb enough to walk into your guns, neither, Webb. We got a wagon wheel up here by the corral, see? We're gonna tie hay between the spokes, set fire to it, an' roll it into the bunkhouse. You'll come out, when that bunkhouse starts cookin', I reckon. You'll get a hideful of lead, then we'll chuck you back in where you come from. When they find what's left of you an' Trafco, after the fire, they'll figure Trafco pumped that lead in you."

"It's no good," Matt yelled. But it was very, very good, he realized, and he felt a quite natural dread at the prospect. The judge looked at him with sick old eyes, and Matt said, "Easy, Judge. We'll think of something."

"Why's it no good, Webb?" Carraway yelled, half interested, half scornful.

MATT said the first thing that came to mind. "Wasteful. Cost you a pretty piece of change to put up another bunkhouse like this one." If only he could stall Carraway somehow, till the kid came back with the doctor from town!

Carraway laughed raucously. "Reckon I can afford this kind of waste, Webb." And to prove it, he sent that wagon wheel rolling. With sick eyes, Matt watched it trundle swiftly around the edge of the corral, roll straight as a die down the slight incline toward the bunkhouse, and come up against the tinder-dry frame structure with a solid thump.

There had been several tufts of flaming dry hay attached to it, and Matt knew now it was just a question of several minutes before that fire spread up the walls of the bunkhouse, spreading a perilous mantle of illumination around the building, through which an attempt to escape would be hopeless.

The judge licked his cracked lips and said, "Looks like we're for it this time, Matt. Wanta make a run for it, before that fire lights up every—"

"Wait." Matt scratched his head. "Here, gimme that black coat of yours, Judge. We've still got a few minutes."

He put the coat on hurriedly, then walked to the pot-bellied stove in the center of the long room, scooped up handsful of wood-and-coal ashes, and smeared his face and hands freely until he looked like a minstrel show performer. The judge watched him weirdly. "What's the—"

Matt waved him to silence. Along the side wall of the building, he lifted three planks, and cautiously let himself down through the hole in the floor he'd created.

"Stay here, Judge, for as long as you can stand the heat, or until you hear shooting outside there. Use those guns in your belt, an' keep raisin' a ruckus. Thing is: Jus never saw you. He don't even know you're in here. The minute I start cuttin' loose outside, you unbolt that front door and make a run for it."

The old man nodded. Matt watched smoke begin to curl along the far wall, where the flame outside was beginning to climb it, and knew he had to move fast. He had grown up on the SP, and years ago, as a kid, he had learned about those three loose floorboards. He had spent whole afternoons down here under the building, dreaming romantic boy dreams of lost caves and dungeons.

There used to be a way out from under the building, too, if he could only still find it. It was a deep furrow, dug out by skunks, who had sought to make a summer home of the SP bunkhouse. It was large enough to admit a man's body, as Matt remembered.

He slithered this way and that through a rubble of tin cans and cobwebs before he finally found it. Time was all-important, he knew, and he stuck an arm through the hole and hauled valiantly to get himself through it. He got his shoulders through by twisting to one side, then the other, but when he tried to get his hips past the barrier, the wooden edge of the wall hooked neatly against his wide cartridge belt.

He found himself stuck there like a wriggling worm on a fishhook, unable now to move either backward or forward. The harder he struggled to fre himself, the more firmly the jutting boards seemed to grip him. He found himself wondering bleakly what it would feel like to be burned alive, caught in such a position.

Then fresh disaster beset him. He heard stealthy footfalls coming toward him, saw a bulky figure loom up above him, and made it out to be Sime Wakefield, the dude bank teller. The man had a gun in his trembling hand, and he was staring cautiously at the blank wall of the bunkhouse, as if half-expecting someone to shoot him dead from inside any second.

He stepped into the hole in the ground, which Matt occupied, like a man falling down stairs in the dark. Matt grabbed the dude bank teller's leg in a two-armed wedge, and effectively tripped him.

SIME WAKEFIELD let out a scream like a schoolgirl, and sent one wild slug crashing into the side of the bunkhouse. Then Matt grabbed the gun from the dude's terrified fingers, and gave him the butt on the top of the head. The man folded over unconscious, and Matt pushed him away.

He was panting—and swearing. That in itself was enough to bring Jus Carraway running. That fool scream of Wakefield's really spelled Matt's doom. Above the crackle of the increasing flames within the bunkhouse he could hear Carraway's throaty voice bellow: "Sime! Sime? What's wrong?" Then Matt heard the red-bearded giant lumbering around from the other side of the building.

Matt heaved desperately, but the jutting wood only cracked, where it wedged him securely. He snapped Sime Wakefield's six-shooter around in back of him, carefully estimated his angle, and put two quick shots into the weakest part of the wood. The slugs were wasted. Still that jutting pair of slats held a death grip where they were hooked into his belt.

Matt burrowed his hands down under his stomach and attacked the big buckle. He finally got it unhooked, and came slithering up out of the hole, snakelike, just in time to see the giant red-beard, Jus Carraway, bolt into view around the corner of the flaming building.

Matt raised Sime Wakefield's gun and snapped a quick shot. The hammer clicked dully against the firing pin, and he triggered again. The gun was empty, he realized sickly, and he swore at the dude who was too dumb to keep his six fully loaded.

Jus Carraway stood there grinning wolfishly as he lined his own gun at Matt's chest. "Been waitin' for a spot like this, Webb. You can say your prayers."

Matt scowled, and flung Wakefield's empty six at the red-bearded giant. Jus Carraway ducked the hurtling weapon. At the same time he was pulling trigger. Matt heard what sounded like a double report, and he leaped aside instinctively.

Carraway's slug ripped through his side and knocked him over. But even while falling, he was gasping with wonder, watching the stunned expression come into Carraway's eyes. The big man tensed, then his knees buckled and he fell to the ground like a sack of flour thrown off a wagon.

White-haired Judge Barrows stepped around that side of the building, holding

a smoking six in his cracked old hands.

"Wh-where'd you come from?" Matt faltered.

"Told me t' make a break for it, soon's I heard shootin'," the old man said crisply. "An' I was none too soon, if you ask me. Hurt bad, are you?"

Matt felt his wound. "Just creased the ribs, Judge. "I'll live, I reckon." He chuckled.

When young Sam Peabody showed up a half-hour later with the doctor from town, Matt read the riot act to that misguided bucko. "Reckon you know what a fool you've been, kid," Matt finished. "I told your pop I'd look out for you. But there's three dead men here, an' two wounded, all account of your gamblin', which I been askin' you to quit right along. I figure if old Sam was here tonight, he'd tell me I'd done my duty. I'm finished. I'm quitting."

The kid looked sort of sick and sheepish. He stared at the burnt-down bunkhouse, at the three dead men being carried out to the wagon, and he shuddered a little. "Listen, Matt, I've learned my lesson. Long as I live, I'll never take another drink or play another hand of stud poker. I mean it."

Matt glanced up quickly. There was a grim look about the kid's eyes that was like the old man, old Sam, when he was het up about something. There was good blood in this kid, Matt knew, but the old man had been too fond of him, had spoiled him. Matt said caustically, "It's been said before, kid. Better men than you have swore off the booze and the pasteboards."

"They never had a lesson like this to help 'em make the decision. Why, hell, I'd've been flat broke, Matt; I'd've lost the whole ranch, if you an' the judge hadn't beefed Jus out for me. I figure this ranch is as much yours as mine anyhow. You helped Pop build it up, and you just saved it for me. I—uh—how about takin' a half-interest in it? You—you've earned it, Matt. And nobody but you can run this spread. Not run it proper."

Matt gaped at the youngster. The kid *had* changed, apparently. He sounded just like old Sam, talking. But Matt shook his head. "I wouldn't even consider it, kid. Takin' charity never went down so good with me."

He felt a sudden prod in the back. It was Judge Barrows. The old man dragged him aside and talked quickly, "Don't be a fool, Matt. Now . . . just listen to me. Old Sam left a second will in my care, one he said that wasn't to be opened unless something happened to young Sam here. I'm holding it in a safe deposit box, up to the bank. I haven't read it, but Sam told me what's in it. The ranch was to go to you, if anything happened to young Sam before he got hitched and took on a family."

Matt grinned a wide grin and turned to the kid. "I'll take that offer, kid, providin' you let me run the ranch my way. That'll mean I give all the orders." He chuckled. "An' if I say you gotta join roundup, or mend fences, or bust a few broncs, you'll take those orders. That suit you?"

The kid looked right at him. "Right down to the ground, Matt."

Matt smiled and put out his hand to young Sam Peabody. He had thought his duty was done, but it was only just starting, he realized. The kid had learned a few valuable lessons, but he was still no great shakes of a man, not by western standards. The kid had a lot to learn about the cow business, and now he had the authority he needed to teach the kid those things.

It might even be fun to make a cowman of old Sam Peabody's son, he decided.

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"OLD ONE-EYED BUCK"

(The Buckskin Outlaw)

By JOE HAIGHT

Old One-eyed Buck is an outlaw horse
I'll tell you he is a "Killer."
He killed Sam Jones and Mexican Pete
And a man by the name of Miller.

Old Buck wasn't mean when he was a colt
We'd taken him in from the weather
He'd ran on the range since the day he was born
You could see he was tough as leather.

He's a "line-backed" buckskin, with a black mane and tail
He's black from his feet to his knees
With a heavy chest and legs that were strong
Well, he used to run like the breeze!

He was four years old when we brought him in—
He was "snorty" and full of "Old Nick,"
He could gallop full-speed and "turn on a dime,"
I'll tell you that colt was quick!

Now, Mexican Pete was a bronco rider
From south of the Rio Grande
He swore that he'd ride that buckskin colt
With only a rope in his hand.

But Mexican Pete was a "drinking" man
Quite often you'll see his kind.
He was tricky and mean and hard as nails
And good riders were sure hard to find.

One Saturday night the "Mex" got "oiled"
And boasted he'd ride that "hoss,"
So, Sunday we hit for the horse-corral
With Mexican Pete and the boss.

Well, the colt got quite a bad rope-burn
When the loop tightened down on his neck
And if I could have stopped Pete from riding that colt
He'd never have been such a wreck!

With his tail tuckered down and his legs spread out—
As the sweat dripped off from his hair,
They dragged him up to the snubbing-post
And saddled and bridled him there.

The "Mex" got in the saddle and then
They let him get ready and "set"
Then turned the colt loose when Pete nodded.
I can see that colt sun-fishing yet!

A half dozen jumps—maybe fewer!
I'll tell you that buckskin could dance!
And a dozen good inches of daylight was there
'Tween the saddle and the seat of Pete's pants!

But the Mexican wouldn't pull leather!
That wasn't his style or his brand!
So the very next minte the "Mex" "hit the dirt,"
With his eyes and his mouth full of sand!

Now that wasn't when Old Buck turned killer
Nor the day when those riders were killed,
But it strengthened Buck's determination
To buck 'til his rider was spilled!

Next week, the boss took the wagon and team
To bring back some groceries from town
But the Mexican stayed at the ranch-house and said,
"I got me no troubles to 'drown.'"

Well the rest of us fellow hit leather for town—
Except Sam Jones and young Miller
They both stayed in with Mexican Pete
The day when the buckskin turned killer.

When we got back from town that night
There wasn't much left of Sam Jones
And young Miller's face was a raw bloody mess
Of broken up flesh and bones!

His legs and his back were broken and torn
And all of his ribs were caved in,
But he lived long enough to talk about Pete
And a butterfly made out of tin!

And before Miller died, he told of the tricks
That Mexican Pete had just tried,
He'd raked that young colt with his Mexican spurs
'Til the blood dripped off from his hide!

With the heavy butt-end of his shot-loaded whip,
He had pounded again and again.
Then he reversed the whip and brought it down hard
'Til the buckskin had screamed out in pain!

It was then we saw what had happened
When Pete used his tin butterfly,
He'd beaten the colt on the ears and the face
And knocked out the pony's right eye!

Then the cinch broke, the Mexican fell
Bringing saddle and blanket and all
With his right foot caught in the stirrup
That one was Pete's fatal fall!

It was then that the buckskin had nailed him!
He sure bit that Mexican hard!
Then pawed Pete right in the belly
And dragged him all over the yard!

Pete and Sam Jones were a horrible mess,
How crooked and limp they were lying!
Old Sam Jones had his skull crushed in
And there, young Miller was dying!

But Mexican Pete was a terrible sight
All covered with blood and sand-burrs,
With his foot still caught in the stirrup
And wearing those Mexican spurs!

His teeth were knocked out and his head was split
On his face was a horrible grin,
And out on the tip of his shot-loaded whip
Was a butterfly made out of tin!

Sam Jones had tried to help, but too late,
For Pete was already dead,
Jones slipped and fell as he tried to dodge
When the buckskin struck at his head.

Then Miller had turned and ran for the fence
And reached the top-rail with a bound,
But the colt reared up and struck out hard
And knocked him back to the ground!

Now, no one rides Old One-eyed Buck
Since he killed Sam Jones and young Miller,
He's always known as "The Outlaw Horse"
And spoken of as "The Old Killer."

One eye was knocked out by that tin butterfly
His ears are all ragged and torn,
With spur-marks over his shoulders and flanks
It's just too bad he was born!

He'll gnash his old teeth and flatten his ears
When anyone passes him by
And all of the burning fires of Hell
Will gleam from his one good eye!

And who was to blame for this outlaw horse?
Not the horse, I'm here to tell!
But a Mexican brute had spoiled him—
And I hope that he's roasting in Hell!

Just "one of those things"—as the world rolls on
With the rest of its struggle and strife—
Those lives were lost on account of a fool
That ruined a horse for life!

HIDES FOR THE HANG-TREE BREED

By Curtis Bishop

Cattlemen's blood ran hot. Beef wasn't worth a buzzard's right eye. But hides were coining dinero for the range-wolf with a trail-fast mount and a razor-sharp skinning knife.

Caddo swerved drunkenly among the milling longhorns. Ben lowered his six-gun as the outlaw fell.

BEN ANTHONY was surprised to find so many horses tethered in front of the Wide S gate. Evidently there was some kind of meeting at Walter Earnest's.

He turned back to his horse and started to remount when Elizabeth Earnest called: "What's your hurry, stranger?"

She came to the gate to meet him, a tall slim girl with wide serious blue eyes and a firm mouth, an aloof sort of girl with none of a woman's artificialities in speech or manner, but enough of a woman with her ruddy complexion and her slender curved body to stir a man's blood, and to make him wish that, for him, there was a different kind of look in her calm eyes.

"No hurry," he answered, rolling a smoke. "But that looks like a pow-wow in there. No place for an honest freighter."

Bess nodded. "They've been palavering for an hour." She waited a moment. "Dad let his last hand go today, Ben," she said quietly. "And Marvin Sledge tells us he's flat. We'll get by 'til Spring on our credit at Martin Mann's. Then, if cattle are still dirt cheap, we're wiped out."

Ben nodded. This was happening everywhere. A stripped cow hide was worth more than a steer on the hoof. For a moment he was silent, his gray eyes looking around him at the neatness of the Wide S ranch. He had spent most of his boyhood here, a waif Walter Earnest had rescued and nourished. He knew this valley land to be the best grass for a hun-

dred miles around. And yet, even with rain, with blue stem knee deep in the flats, the Wide S was broke. Walter Earnest, who for twenty years had been a kindly power in this cattle country, a giant of a man in a land where men must be strong to survive, couldn't pay his riders!

Bess gave a little laugh. "And Dad thought you were crazy to cut loose from the ranch! I suppose, Ben you were only one of us who were smart."

"I wouldn't say that," he sighed. It hadn't been intuition that had sent him riding away five years before, first to buy wild longhorns further south and drive them up the trail in reckless trading, then to take his profits and open this country's first freight and stage line. For a long time he had yearned, and even still, for the comfort and the dignity of a ranch like Walter's. But, in such a short time, this country had lost its wildness, and its openness. The land had been all taken up until Anthony had not been able to find a foothold. He could have ridden on, to Arizona or Wyoming. But something brought him back and held him. A part of that something, more than he had ever admitted, was Bess Earnest.

Walter called from the doorway. "Come on in, Ben."

The Wide S owner was tall and stooped. His white moustache dropped away from his ruddy face like dry palm leaves and his eyes were as beady and keen as they had been forty years ago, when he had first come to Texas.

"Don't want to break into your meeting, Walter. Just rode out to chew the fat."

'Meeting's over," Walter said. Harry Odell came out of the door and grinned at Anthony.

"Come on in here," he grinned. "Think I can enjoy myself while you're outside with my gal?"

Ben's face lost some of its gravity. All of these men gathered in Walter's living room were his friends. He had their approval because he showed good business judgement and because he was honest and friendly in his dealings. But Harry Odell was the type of friend a man has but once. They had played and worked together as boys. And Ben Anthony, quick with his loyalty and unshaking when his devotion was given, was utterly blind to what other men in the valley were beginning to whisper—that Odell's Dollar Mark ranch was doing surprisingly well in a time when no honest ranchman could hold his head above water.

Ben said "howdy" and that included them all—the Camerons, John and Martin and Alan; the Maitlands, Keith and Alex; tight-lipped surly Fritz Warner, the man whom they said squeezed a dollar until it oozed blood; bespectacled owlish Marvin Sledge, the banker; and big genial Morgan Mann, whose general store in Alice served outfits more than a day's ride away.

"We should be like Ben," said Morgan, "and not have any money worries. He was smart."

ANTHONY shrugged off the compliment, although he couldn't help a momentary glow of pride.

"You'd better see about borrowing dough from Anthony here," Sledge said in a cracked voice. "He's got more money than the bank."

"I think we can make out," Walter answered from the doorway. "Ben we've formed an association. All of us have had to let our hands go. Harry is keeping three boys, God knows how. But the rest of us have got to do our own riding. We're making this a common range until the panic is over. We're through fighting each other for grass. Until prices go up, we're fighting Caddo Parker and his wolves."

Ben nodded. He knew their problem. There were no rustlers in this country, not as they had once thought of rustling. No steer was worth the trouble of stealing with prices this low. But gangs were sweeping through the ranches killing stock wantonly, stripping their heads then and there, until at Port Lavaca and Galveston there were dry hides stacked up higher than a man's head waiting for shipment.

"I'll help you men out one way," Ben offered. "I've shipped some hides for Parker to Lavaca. I didn't want the business but I didn't know how to get out of taking it. From now on I'm not taking hides until there is a bill of sale with it."

"That will help," approved Walter "We have to sell some hides. No way around

it. Our folks got to eat. Harry tells us his lower range is overstocked and he has to clean out the culls. But what we got to do, even if we starve, is to keep stockers. This will be over next Spring. I talked to Gilbert Henry in San Antone and he tells me the meat ain't getting to the crossroads stores, and that the Army will buy up plenty of beef in the Spring."

"I can carry you men for your groceries," confirmed Morgan Mann. "Don't ask me how, but I'll do it some way. Ben there has a wagon load of stuff in his shed which I ain't paid out yet. I can't."

"I'll deliver it in the morning," Anthony offered quickly. "I didn't know that's what you were waiting on. When I've got to deny you credit, I'll go out of business."

"That's the spirit, lad," Earnest approved. "With that kind of feeling among us, we'll lick this winter. We'll lick Caddo Parker. I'll be up at daybreak riding my south pasture. I'm shooting at any and all riders I can't recognize."

There were answering echoes.

"Every man's troubles are his neighbor's," Walter went on. "If a gang comes out, we can form a posse and chase 'em off. The steriff can't help us. Nobody has paid their county taxes and he can't keep a deputy working. It's up to us. And that's as it should be. We fought for this country once, and we can do it again."

"I'll see about getting money in San Antonio," promised Sledge. "You men know if I can get my hands on it, I'll let you have it. But already I'm in over my head. I've traded some of your notes at a discount. I'll never foreclose but the loan company will. I'd say next Spring is your deadline."

"We'll meet it," Alan Cameron promised. His two sons nodded. Ben mused that the Camerons would be good men to have around in a fight.

As the meeting broke up, Fritz Warner came to Anthony.

"Did you get in some freight for me today, Mr. Anthony?"

He was always like that, mistering his neighbors, speaking only when absolutely necessary. But there was something deep in Fritz Warner's eyes that showed he was no grovelling weakling. He had taken a squatter's patch and built it up slowly. Even now he ran a one-man spread, with only an upper finger of the valley for grazing. But respect for Warner's industry and frugality was mounting.

"Yes, Fritz."

"I'll be in town for it in the morning," Fritz promised.

Sledge plucked at Ben's shoulder. "Riding back to town, Ben? I'll keep you company."

"Stay for supper, Ben," Earnest said.

"No, I'll get on back. Stage busted a spring and I gotta see if its ready to roll."

"Business holding up?"

"Dropping some," Anthony shrugged. "But I'm getting drivers cheaper. Everybody wants to work for me."

"It tore me to let my hands go," Earnest sighed. "I guess every rider in this country is looking for a job."

"And milling around saloons," Ben added. "Caddo Parker can be plumb choosey about who he rides with. I'm ready, Marvin."

Harry Odell and Bess Earnest were talking by the well. She was sitting on the stone rim, her chin on her elbows. She saw that Ben was leaving and called out in protest.

"I thought you'd stay for supper."

"No," he grinned. "Old Harry goes green with jealousy every time I ride up."

"You'll come again? We haven't seen enough of you lately."

"When are you riding your north pasture?" Anthony demanded of Odell. "I don't want this waddy always underfoot when I come out."

THEY laughed and Ben turned to his horse. Sledge was already in the saddle, sitting there nervously, shoulders hunched forward. He was never at ease on a horse.

They rode a few miles in silence. Then Sledge said: "You're missing the chance of a lifetime, Anthony."

"How come?" Ben muttered.

"Some of these spreads are going under. Most of 'em. I think Odell will keep his head up because he has the sense to sell enough stock to keep on the cash basis. But the Camerons and the Maitlands and even old Walt won't last another year. If you'd buy their notes from me, you could

foreclose 'em and have a spread of your own."

"I couldn't do that," Ben shot out.

"Why not?" snapped Sledge, a little peeved that Ben wouldn't come around to his point of view.

"The loan company will do it. I've had to juggle my paper. I'm just a small man; I can't carry it all. The Cattlemen's Loan Association won't fool around with these men after Spring shipping. They'll pay up, or they'll get off."

"Mebbe," Anthony shrugged. "But I don't want it, Sledge."

"You're a fool. You're eating your heart out for a ranch right here in this valley. Money won't buy it. But your money can get it, after a time."

"No," Ben said firmly. He pulled his horse. "I just remember, I gotta talk to Morgan. I'll see you later, Sledge."

"Better change your mind," the banker called after him.

Ben's lips tightened. Perhaps Marvin Sledge was only trying to do him a favor. What the banker offered was a temptation. The Alice bank was having to trade its paper to a San Antonio investment firm, The Cattlemen's Loan Association. The Maitlands and the Camerons and the Wide S were already in debt up to their ears. Unless the market turned, they couldn't pay the interest next Spring, which would throw the principal due. The one who owned those notes could foreclose. He pulled up on the trail until Morgan Mann came over a rise, almost as big as the paint he was riding.

"Glad you waited, Ben," puffed the storekeeper. "Need somebody along if this fool cayuse decides to act up."

"After carrying your carcass this far he ain't got the spirit," grinned Ben.

He rode along with Morgan at a gentle trot. "How's the Wide S account?" he asked suddenly.

"Shouldn't talk about my customers, Ben," Morgan gently reproved him. "But I reckon I can guess at your motive. Old Walt ain't paid me in two years."

"I'll bring you a thousand dollars in the morning," Ben said. "That should carry him through."

"Near about." Morgan's mild blue eyes studied Ben's face. "You're all wool and a yard wide, Ben."

"Hell, he practically raised me," snapped Anthony.

"Still," insisted Morgan, "old Walt ain't too easy to live with. I can remember him chomping at the bit when you went off on that cattle deal. Said if he was ten years younger he'd tan your hide."

Ben chuckled. "And if he could have laid his hands on me, he'd have tried it."

II

CADDO PARKER was leaning against the bar.

"Morning, Caddo," Anthony said curtly.

"Belly up," invited Caddo.

"Too early in the day for me," Ben refused.

"Ride all night and you're ready for a drink," shrugged Caddo. "I got a load of hides for you, Ben."

"And your bill of sale, I suppose?"

"Sure, sure," Caddo grinned. The parting of his lips showed a missing front tooth. Once Caddo's kind had rustled live cattle and delivered them on the hoof to shady operators across the river, or near to the border. Now it was harder work, but less risk. Cattle had to be slaughtered and stripped of hides. Called for more men. But more men were available.

Even at this early hour unemployed line riders were sitting in the saloon. They could ride over the hill but over there it was the same story. There wasn't a ranch anywhere who could keep a man-sized outfit. Some of 'em were bitter about their fate, and out to get theirs where they could. Perhaps they had a side.

"Five hundred hides," gloated Caddo, "from the Dollar Mark. Got a bill of sale right here."

Ben started. This was Harry Odell's outfit. Harry had announced he had intended to sell off some culls but Ben had not expected anything like this.

Finally he nodded after examining the bill of sale, written in pencil on a dirty sheet of paper. Harry's writing all right.

"I'll take 'em. Bring 'em over to my yard."

"Already there," Caddo drawled.

His beady eyes studied Ben's face. Thus far they had not clashed. They had even done business together. But there had been a quick mutual dislike, and as Caddo stay-

ed in the Alice country their relations were getting more and more strained. Any kind of a spark would set off this conflagration.

"There'll be more pronto," said Caddo. "I got more boys buying for me."

"I'll take all you can show a bill of sale for," Anthony said back over his shoulder. He couldn't explain the rage he felt in Caddo's presence. How and where Caddo obtained his hides was no business of Ben Anthony's. Parker paid in cash for his freighting, and that was all a man was supposed to ask.

Ben went to his wagon and gave orders to Tommy Melvin to load the hides. There was a load in Port Lavaca he could bring back, leather and case goods for Mann.

Then he remembered his promise to Morgan Mann. "Deliver Morgan's freight today," he told Tommy. "Before you pull out. Don't bother about collecting; I'll drop by there tomorrow."

He saddled his chestnut and galloped to Odell's Dollar Mark, a full ten miles of twisting trail that led through the foothills of the Acalupe range. He saw smoke rising from the flats and knew Harry and his crew were branding away from home. He rode into the fire with a cheery hello and Harry handed the iron to a rider and stood by his horse, rolling a smoke and grinning up at him.

"Stick around. We'll have chow in a minute."

Ben nodded and watched with interest as the calf was branded. This was the life for a man, not dealing with freight and squeamish stage coach passengers. He rolled out of his saddle and called Harry away from the fire.

"Caddo is shipping five hundred hides by me. Has your bill of sale."

"I sold 'em," Harry nodded. "I've got too much stock, Ben. And not enough cash."

Ben took a twig and began to whittle it into the shape of a pistol. "I don't want to see you in too deep, podner," he said gently. "You got a nice start. Your dad left you good range and plenty of stockers. Can't you figger a way to keep 'em 'til spring."

"Most of 'em," Harry said. "I'm getting by, Ben."

A queer smile was playing around Odell's mouth. Yes, he was getting by. Ambition is not always born in a man; sometimes it comes later, of a sudden, on an inspiration.

"I don't want you on a shoe-string," frowned Ben. "My money isn't good for anything except to help out my friends. Would a couple of thousand do you any good, Harry?"

A refusal was on the tip of Odell's tongue. Then he realized it would do no harm to let the word get out that Anthony was staking the Dollar Mark.

"Well, podner," grinned Harry, "I won't turn it down." He had the kind of grin which warmed a heart, male or female. "I could get by, and I'm not asking you for help. But you know old Harry. Always picking the easy trail. I got some expensive habits, Ben. I'll take your money."

"Fine," Ben nodded. "I can't think of any better use for it. I'll have Sledge credit you with two grand. And, if you get in a jam, send for me."

"I'm in no jam now," answered Odell. "I'm just taking it because I know you won't sleep until I do."

"You're right there," Anthony admitted.

Anthony stood up, his avid eyes watching the branding crew. The Mexican vaquero was sloppy with his iron and Harry offered no objection.

"I'll mosey," he said jerkily.

He rode into town, skirting the edge of Walter Earnest's valley grass. It was a little out of his way but Walter had too much pasture for a single man to ride.

He was surprised at seeing so few cattle. He hadn't realized how Walt was slipping. He wished he could ride up to the ruddy-faced old man and do with the Wide S as he had done with Harry Odell's Dollar Mark, offer a loan. But he knew Walt would take that as an affront.

ODELL grinned at his sagacity in accepting this friendly loan. Anthony had offered it in sympathy, lending a strong shoulder to a friend who had inborn weaknesses. Like Old Walt, Ben felt it a personal concern to see that Harry's backbone didn't wilt in these hard times. They thought him too easy-going, even too lazy.

Odell's grin became a chuckle. Let 'em

think so. He didn't have their mute dogged drive. He didn't need it.

While it was still mid-afternoon he sent his three vaqueros over into the deeper brush and rode away on an errand of his own. Of late it was becoming more and more difficult to arrange secret meetings with Melba Melvin. Perhaps old Timothy, who had lived in one of the back canyons on Earnest's land for a long time, was getting suspicious. Harry knew he was playing with fire, but, in spite of what this country thought of him, he liked the feeling of risk.

The Wide S had not used this line cabin in a long time, for the canyon was rough range and almost more trouble to work than it was worth. When cattle brought high prices Walter could throw steers in here, and hire extra help, and show a profit. But not now. Harry tethered his horse up on the ridge and went down the foot path. Melba would be there as she had promised.

The shack built against the cliff face, was inaccessible on horseback. He saw the door was open and his whistle was gay and tuneful and his dark eyes danced in anticipation. Melba was cute. Perhaps too chubby, but he wasn't marrying her and he needn't worry about her getting fat with middle age. He was marrying Bess Earnest. Melba was just a diversion.

He stepped through the door expecting Melba to run into his arms. Instead she stood across the cabin, her back turned to him.

The ejaculation died on his lips as he saw Timothy Melvin, a buffalo gun across his lap.

"Howdy, Timothy," Harry murmured.

For a long time Timothy did not speak. Melba turned once, for an agonizing look, and then hid her face again.

"This is a hard situation to meet, Harry," Timothy said finally.

"Yes, Timothy," agreed Harry.

"If you wasn't a man already spoken," went on Timothy, "it would be easy. I guess Melba should have had better sense, but she's been a flighty lass ever since she was knee-high to a calf. I've been fearing something like this a long time. But you, Odell! Your common sense ought to have stopped you even if Melba was willing from the start. Which she denies she was. I got my gal to think of. She's a ruined woman. Nobody is gonna take what you throw off. I never thought I'd hold a gun on a man and tell him he hasta marry my daughter. Seems to me that's a poor way of starting off married life. But what else is there, Odell?"

"I don't know," Harry muttered.

His mind was blank.

"I know it upsets your plans, Odell," Melvin said harshly. "You figgered on marrying well—Walt Earnest's daughter. But you took my girl first. I'm giving you a choice. Marry my girl or I'll blow your head off."

There's a way out of this, Harry thought, but he couldn't find it at once.

"I see your side, Tim," he said smoothly. "We lost our heads, both of us. I'm to blame as much as Melba is. I'll do the right thing, Tim. Gimme a little time and . . ."

"What do you mean by time?"

"I can't just ride into town with you and Melba and get hitched. I got to break off from Bess Earnest gentle-like. We don't want it known over the valley that this was a shotgun wedding."

Melba finally spoke to Odell. "Pa followed us last night. He got me home and made me tell. I didn't want to. He made me."

Odell's eyelids flickered. Damn the nosy old squatter for tracking his daughter!

"I'll start breaking off with the Earnests," he said with dignity. "Say a month, Timothy, we'll let word get out that I'm marrying Melba."

"All right. That makes sense."

He let the barrel of his buffalo gun drop to the packed dirt floor.

"I hate this, Odell. It ain't the way people should get married."

"Maybe it will work out for the best," said Harry, flashing a grin.

"I'll see you later," he told Melba. She came across the cabin to him.

"Harry, it ain't my fault," she pleaded "I didn't want it this way."

"I'm glad we are together," he said cheerfully.

Timothy Melvin took his daughter's arm.

"We'll ride on," he said. "Come see us, Harry. A visit or two would hold back the talk when it starts."

"Sure thing," Harry agreed.

HE watched Timothy and Melba scramble down the ledge to their horses. Then, when they were out of sight, he sat down on the bunk and cursed heartily.

Harry was thinking of the monetary consideration involved. The merger of the Wide S and the Dollar Mark would have given him the biggest ranch in South Texas.

It was strange that he could have concealed this strong ambition from his close friend, Ben Anthony, even from the girl he was engaged to, Bess Earnest. Beneath his affability, his lackadaisical talk and grin, he was mocking them for their judgment of him. There would be more than the combined Wide S Dollar Mark when this panic was over. Harry Odell had foreseen the possibilities that Ben had considered, and that Ben doggedly refused to consider twice.

Perhaps the game Harry Odell played was dangerous. Certainly none of his close friends, or Bess Earnest, thought him capable of that recklessness. That pleased him, too. He, of all the men in this valley, could work with Caddo Parker without attracting suspicion. Every card was in his favor. Every possible angle had been anticipated and he had the answers ready.

Except for this interlude with the black-haired daughter of a squatter! Damn the wench anyhow. He left the bunk with a curse. Melvin was a fool if he thought Harry Odell would give up the Wide S, and calm-eyed Bess Earnest, just to appease a squatter's wounded pride.

When he reached Alice he went direct to the saloon and ordered a drink. He sipped it slowly. He saw Anthony laboring in the wagon yard across the street and he envied his friend's absorption in loading the wagon. There was a man with no worries. No weakness. Only strength, physical and moral. The combination of Anthony's physique and character and Harry Odell's astute brain could take over this country in short order. Harry sighed, and wished that he could trust Ben with his own dark secrets.

Caddo Parker came in just before dark.

"Howdy, Odell," Caddo said curtly.

Harry's answer was a formal nod. These two men were too wise to show even an informality of acquaintance.

Harry let Caddo and his two companions take a seat at one of Lucky Luke's tables. Then he turned and said in a harsh voice any man in the saloon could have heard.

"I rode through my lower pasture today, Caddo. I can let you have a hundred culls if you want the hides."

"Can always use hides," Caddo grunted. "Wet your whistle while we talk it over."

"I've had a drink, thanks," Harry said. "Ride out tomorrow and we'll count 'em out."

"Sure," Caddo agreed.

Parker's head made a barely perceptible motion as he understood the look in Odell's eyes. Odell wanted more of Caddo than to sell him a hundred culls for slaughter, and skinning. Caddo grinned as Odell left the saloon and walked across the street to Anthony's wagon yard. The fellow played a dangerous game well. And most of the men in this country clucked their tongues disapprovingly at Harry Odell's easy-going laziness.

III

CADDO lit a cigar and surveyed the furnishings of Odell's house. Harry's father had been a little more expensive in his tastes than other men just moulding this rough country to their own advantage. There was upholstery here, and rugs, and pictures.

"A nice layout," Caddo approved.

"Yeah."

Harry held his own cigar to the flickering candle and downed his glass of whiskey before speaking further. Caddo watched him with some amusement. The young fellow was plenty worried about something. Parker had his troubles, but the fear of discovery was not one of them. And never had been. Hard as he was, Caddo would have never been guilty of that.

"What's eating you?" Caddo finally demanded.

"Plenty," Harry said jerkily. "You know Tim Melvin?"

Caddo nodded.

"I played around with his girl," Harry explained. "Tim came to see me . . ."

"And pointed his gun at you?" grinned

the outlaw. "Tough, son. Ol' Timothy will blast the hell out of you if you don't buy a wedding ring pronto."

"I can't do that," Odell growled. "I'm going to marry Bess Earnest. You know that."

"Sure," nodded Caddo. "That Wide S land ain't to be sneezed at."

"Nor the girl," growled Harry, irked that Caddo could see through him so easily. "I ain't marrying Melvin's daughter, Caddo. And I don't like the idea of Timothy turning his buffalo gun on me either."

Caddo shrugged his shoulders. This good-looking man, whose sinister side was so cleverly covered, had an idea. Most of Odell's ideas were good.

"You can help me out, Caddo," proposed Odell. "And yourself at the same time."

"Mainly," drawled Parker, studying the tip of his cigar, "I'm interested in the latter."

"Sure. Sledge wants Walt Earnest whipped down. We can kill all three of these birds with one stone."

"Sledge," murmured Caddo, "is the type of man who wants everybody whipped down."

"But Walt 'specially," insisted Harry. "Walt will hold this country up as long as he can. Sledge knows that."

"Yep," Caddo agreed. "I don't mind telling you I've laid off the Wide S some on your account. I figgered what we stole from Earnest was the same as stealing from you."

"Not exactly," frowned Harry. "I want Walt driven to the wall myself. He looks down his nose at me. He's got an idea I want his daughter because I want his cattle, and his grass. I want the grass. I can use the cattle. But I'd rather, even if it's the same as money out of my own pocket, to have Walt stone-broke by spring."

"So," guessed Caddo, "you can come to his rescue, save the Wide S from foreclosure with your cash, and let the old man know you can carry your own weight."

"Exactly."

Caddo stirred in his chair with a sigh. This Odell was the smart operator. Had the comforts of life, plus the advantages of respectability, without none of the risks. And yet the cash in his jeans.

"We're agreed," he said. "Sledge wants Walt stripped. You want him down to rock-bottom. So we got after some Wide S stock. But how does that tie in with Tim Melvin and the gal?"

"You need a bill of sale for the hides. Anthony won't take 'em otherwise."

"Anthony," nodded Caddo, "is getting plumb troublesome. The guy won't stay in his own pew."

"Not Ben," smiled Harry. "Why not a bill of sale from Tim Melvin for the Wide S stock?"

"Forged?" Caddo asked softly.

"I don't see how you could get it otherwise," Harry shrugged.

"How will that help you?"

"It will," Odell grinned. This wasn't one of his pleasant grins. "Especially if you plant some other hides around Timothy's place. Say in that old line cabin back of the spring."

This was the same cabin where Melba and Odell had met.

"Then what happens?"

"Then we'll let nature take its course," Harry said triumphantly.

Caddo studied the tip of his half-smoked cigar. "I don't usually pull stunts like that. It's a little raw—even for me."

"You got to help me out, Caddo," begged Harry.

"I'll talk to Sledge," Caddo parried. Even as he held off, he knew he would do what this man wanted. He stood up. "Lemme get this straight. You figger Earnest will decide that Melvin is slaughtering his cattle and selling the hides. Walt will call some of his pals in and they'll run Melvin out of the country. Is that your idea?"

"Exactly."

"Might work," Caddo conceded. "I'm willing anyhow. On one condition. If that Melba girl is running around loose, I want her. I get lonesome sometime.'

"I don't care what happens to her," Odell shrugged.

CADDO rode slowly back to Alice. For an owlhooter with a night rider's past, he was certainly moving in high company. Even getting social-minded, for his next call was upon Marvin Sledge, the banker. He repeated what Odell had told him, omitting his ideas about Melba's fu-

ture if and when the Melvins were chased out.

"I see no objections," said Sledge. "Earnest is holding these ranchmen up. I had the Maitlands about ready to sign a release for their land 'til Walt jacked 'em up."

Caddo nodded. "Odell," he said slowly, "is a wise waddy. You thought you was playing him, Sledge. It may turn out that he is playing you and me for suckers."

"No," the banker said firmly. "Odell will stick by his bargain."

Caddo shrugged his shoulders. He had no illusions about his connections with either men. He trusted neither. But of late he had decided that Odell was the most dangerous. He would ride on to another range come spring, and he was beginning to doubt if he had acted wisely in accepting this secret partnership with Marvin Sledge and Harry Odell. It seemed to Caddo that he was being used to pull chestnuts out of the fire while Sledge and Odell would eventually divide the harvest of his labors.

But he would keep his bargain. He rode out to study the layout around Tim Melvin's, going to the abandoned line cabin where Odell had suggested he place the hides. He looked down at the small cabin where Melvin had raised his large family against the terrible odds that any squatter on a Texas range had to face. Then, stony faced, he cut across the slopes toward the Wide S headquarters, and from a wooded ridge, saw how Earnest's cattle were drifting toward the flats.

He saw Ben Anthony ride up to the gate. Bess Earnest met him. He wondered with a crooked grin if Odell was taking too much for granted there. Then he shrugged his shoulders and galloped back to Alice.

The times were in Caddo's favor. He could take his pick of a half-hundred men loafing helplessly about town, and he could pay 'em just about what he chose. Most of them would have been honest men had they been given a chance. Caddo knew that some of them despised him even as they took orders from him.

But that worried him precious little. He selected five men and gave his orders. One man's lips moved in protest. Once this rider had worked for Walt Earnest. Caddo made a mental note of this objection. Perhaps something would happen to this rider on the raid.

His men gathered in the salt flats behind Dry Devil's River, and Caddo led them up the back trail to Walt's range at a gallop. They could ride openly these nights. A handful of men were trying to guard a territory bigger than the entire state of Rhode Island. Caddo Parker could recall more profitable nights, but not safer ones.

The six riders scattered into the brushy flat and soon the night was heavy with tell-tale noises, the grunt and snort of a resentful steer, the clatter of a horse breaking in swift pursuit, the scraping of mesquite thorns against leather chaps. Caddo watched from a ridge, shouting orders.

By moonlight the night riders closed in their sweep, driving surly bawling cattle ahead. They took the open trail to Dutchman's Ridge and at a trail forking Caddo called a halt.

"You boys ride ahead," he ordered. "Pickett and I will go back for the strays."

The rider called Pickett, who had protested against raiding Earnest's range, followed his new boss without protest. Caddo pulled up his chestnut a mile from the forking.

"Reckon you're too friendly with Earnest to suit me, Pickett."

"What you mean? I worked for Walt one roundup. He treated me white."

"Sure. And you don't like stealing from your old boss."

Pickett's voice showed fear. "Caddo, what's eating you? You ain't afraid of me squealing, are you?"

"That's right," Parker answered in a dull monotone.

Suddenly Pickett clawed for his gun. Caddo shot first. Caddo had come prepared.

Pickett slumped from his saddle with a groan. His well-trained horse stood placid, staring down at the fallen rider. Caddo seized the bridle and rejoined his men.

They were pushing the steers into a blind canyon where Caddos butchers were safe from prying eyes. The stench here was enough to turn a man's stomach. The lumbering steers stumbled over the horns and rotting carcasses of other beef cattle driven here and slaughtered for their hides

and tallow. It was a wanton waste and Caddo Parker, holding his nose against the stench, liked it no better than any other man.

But he barked orders and there were two new men who had to be shown how to skin a steer swiftly. A fusillade of shots cracked out above the bawling of cattle and the soft cursing of unhappy men.

At that it was daylight before they had finished their gruesome task. Caddo sent the four riders into town with the hides that didn't show the Wide S brand. Some of the others he stacked in a deserted cabin atop the canyon, where already branded hides were piled high waiting for a chance to run them out. He selected a half-dozen hides bearing the Wide S mark and rode to the cabin Odell had mentioned.

He tossed the hides into a corner, and wondered if valley men would fall for a plant like this. Probably. Cattlemen's blood ran hot at this rustling and slaughtering, hotter even than at rustling alone. They would leap at the chance to wreak vengeance upon a culprit they could handle. The Parker gang rode unchallenged, with never the trouble taken to hurl an accusation or to deny it. But a lone squatter would be dealt swift retribution.

Caddo completed his job and rode back to town. Ben Anthony and Tommy Melvin had finished unloading a freight wagon, more supplies for Morgan Mann, and were eating breakfast.

Parker also ate. When Anthony started out, Caddo held up his hand.

"Got a few hides, Ben. Got a wagon going to Corpus soon?"

Ben nodded. "Bring your bill of sale," he added curtly.

"Sure, sure," Caddo grinned.

WALT Earnest was up early. Now, with no crew of riders, it was his job to feed the string of horses before breakfast. He rubbed down his favorite mount, a sleek paint that Ben Anthony had broken six years before, and was feeding the tame animal oats when Bess called that breakfast was ready.

He ate in grim silence, then pushed back his plate. "We're losing calves," he said, "because we can't get 'em branded."

He studied his daughter's face. He didn't want to add the rest of the story—that he was sure Harry Odell was separating unbranded stock from the S-marked yearlings and driving them across to his range, where his Mexicans were slapping the Dollar Mark on 'em. Walt couldn't regard this as outright stealing; the Wide S had followed the same practice in the good years before this panic. The theory was that the other ranchman's crews would brand as many of your dogies as you did of his.

But now, with the pinch on, with no ranchman able to work his range, it was tromping on a prostrate man. Especially since they had held their meeting and agreed to work as an association instead of keeping a weather eye out for any unbranding yearling they might convert to their own stock.

"I can help you this afternoon, Dad," Bess said.

"All right," he said glumly. "Wasn't Ben here yesterday?"

"Yes."

"Fine boy," Walt said heartily. "They don't come better."

"They sure don't," Bess said enthusiastically.

Walt sighed. That was the trouble. Bess was as crazy about Ben as a woman could be, but she didn't realize it. She thought of him as a big brother, and couldn't for the life of her see the look in Ben's eyes, which wasn't brother-like at all. If Ben would speak up, shock the living daylights out of her with his declaration, set her to thinking, set her to comparing Ben Anthony with Harry Odell, she might change her mind about Odell. But until she got rid of this brother-sister notion Ben didn't have a chance. And soon it would be too late.

Earnest tied his rifle on his saddle and swung stiffly atop the paint. He couldn't keep up this riding much longer. His daughter didn't know it, but several times a day he had to stop and rest. His blood pressure was getting higher and higher; he didn't need a doctor to tell him that. But to give up the Wide S, to abandon his cattle to the mercies of men like Caddo Parker . . . he'd ride himself to death first!

He circled the upper pasture and sighed at the crop of yearlings feeding around the natural tank created by interwoven ridges.

Walt Earnest was ahead of his time in building up his stock. These yearlings were worth at least three cents a pound more than usual range beeves, in normal years, that is. Now they were all, wild longhorns and range beef alike, worth less than their hides and tallow.

He turned his horse toward the flats. It was brushier here, and except for Dusty Creek winding through the mesquites, worth little to him. He splashed across the creek, no more than a ripple of a muddy water, and found the first signs of Caddo Parker's raid on the other side. He dug spurs to his horse and circled through the brush. The trail was easy to follow, for the outlaws had made no effort to conceal their tracks. Not until Walt reached the road leading to Falfurias did he lose the markings.

There it was impossible to follow the trail. The hoofs of hundreds of steers, most of them driven by Caddo's night raiders, had churned this road into a chopped pattern.

Walt turned back and rode to the Maitlands. His wise eyes had guessed that probably eighty of his cattle had been driven off.

Keith Maitland listened grim-faced to Walt's story. Then he called his brother, Alex, and they rode to the Camerons. They found John and Martin working in the corral. Martin went for his son, Alan, while the others waited.

"How many of 'em were unbranded, Walt?" asked Keith Maitland.

"I'd guess a dozen," said the Wide S owner. "I'm way behind with branding. No help."

"If it was Caddo," mused Maitland, "he wouldn't try to get Anthony to take the branded hides for shipment. Mebbe we'd better see Anthony."

EARNEST agreed. They rode to town and found Ben supervising the loading of the Lavaca-bound wagon that carried the twenty unbranded hides. A strip of rawhide held the skins together.

"Ben, a word with you," called Walter Earnest.

Anthony left the wagon and joined them at the fence. "Sure, Walt. What's eating you?"

"I lost about eighty head of cattle last night. I see you got some hides on there."

"Yes. Twenty."

He reached into his pocket. "Here's the bill of sale Caddo showed me."

He had known this was coming. He could anticipate their reaction. Where would Timothy Melvin get twenty unbranded steers to slaughter and skin?

The bill of sale was on rough paper, pencil-written. Walt made out Timothy's name scrawled on the bottom. Shaky writing, as if signed in a hurry. Or on horseback.

"Melvin!" he growled.

"That damned squatter!" added Maitland. "Walt, you should have run him off long ago."

"Suppose," Ben drawled, "you men keep your shirts on. I've known Tim a long time. He's never stolen cattle before."

"He's killed many a calf for beef," Cameron said bitterly.

"So what?" countered Ben. "That's done every day in this country. I recall Walt there telling him to help himself to a yearling whenever his folks needed meat."

"So I did," Earnest agreed. "And this is the way he pays me back."

Odell called from the door of the saloon across the street.

"You men come across for a drink."

"Haven't got time," Walt shouted back.

Odell came over. "What's the trouble?"

"Tim Melvin raided Walt's stock," Alan Cameron said curtly.

"Well," shrugged Harry. "Squatters eat somehow. They don't raise stock of their own. They don't make enough farming to keep a gopher alive. I'm not surprised."

Walt regarded Odell with angry eyes. "You've been working close to those flats. See any signs of Melvin rustling?"

"No-o." Then slowly, "I saw Tim skulking around that old line cabin of yours, half-way up the canyon. I was across the gulch but it looked to me like he was slaughtering a steer. Of course it might have been a deer, Tim hunts a lot."

Walt turned to Keith Maitland. "Let's ride out and look around that cabin."

The Maitlands and Camerons agreed. "Mind if I come along?" Anthony asked.

"Yes," Earnest said quickly. "If we find anything, we're riding on to settle with Melvin. You needn't be mixed up in it."

"I just want to point out," Ben said

slowly, "that Tim didn't do much rustling on his own. Did one man drive off the stock you missed last night?"

"No," Walt conceded. "But any kind of rustling has gotta stop. I don't mind Melvin killing a yearling for beef, but this slaughtering for hides and tallow calls for action. Mebbe Melvin is working with the Parker gang."

"You don't believe that, Walt," Ben retorted.

"Are you taking up for Melvin?" flashed Earnest.

"Mebbe," Anthony said curtly.

Odell watched them with confident amusement. It would be funny if Walt Earnest and Ben Anthony broke up over what happened to a squatter.

Walt glared at Ben a moment, then wheeled off to his horse. The Maitlands and Camerons followed him.

Ben sighed. "Hate to see Walt go off half-cocked," he murmured to Harry.

"Better sit out this hand," said Odell. The idea suddenly occurred to him that Anthony might try to stop him. He knew his friend's capaciy for taking the side of the underdog, and seeing it through. "Sure enough, Ben," he urged, catching the big man's shoulder as Ben started fater Walt. "Take my word for it, Tim Melvin has been sniping at Walt's steers. I didn't tell Walt so. But I ran across the evidence."

Ben fingered the bill of sale he held in his hand. "I guess so," he muttered. "Guess Tim was getting hard up for cash. Why didn't the stubborn old fool come to see me?"

Odell sighed in relief as he saw that Anthony did not propose to intervene further. Harry squinted toward the Northeast. Walt and his fellow ranchmen were now specks in the distance, riding fast for the abandoned cabin where Caddo Parker had hidden the tell-tale hides. Well, what they would find should cook Mister Melvin's goose. Harry wandered off to the saloon for a drink.

IV

CADDO had thrown the hides just inside the door; they were the first sight Walt Earnest saw when he thrust it open. He examined them and found them all carrying his brand.

"This is enough for me," he growled. "That damned squatter had better be out of the country by morning."

The Camerons and Maitlands were in hearty assent. The six of them thundered down upon Tim Melvin, who was cutting cedar posts in front of his cabin.

"Howdy, gents," Tim said heartily. "Walt, dang it, you ain't got any business gallivanting around over the country like this. You ain't a button any more."

Then Timothy saw Walt's black anger and frowned.

"What's the trouble?"

Walt dismounted, breathing heavily.

"You got an hour to pack up. Get moving."

Agatha Melvin stepped out of the door. "Howdy, Walt Earnest," she called. "Stay a spell and I'll heat the coffee."

"No, Maw," Timothy said. "Walt has given us notice. An hour to get out."

"Why, Walt Earnest!" exclaimed Agatha. "I never heard of such. After these years we can't . . .!"

"You heard me, Tim," growled Walt, breaking into the woman's talk. "It'll go hard for you if I ever see you on my range again."

Tim Melvin had turned to the cabin. Now he wheeled back at Earnest's threat.

"Walt Earnest, I'll get off your land when you say the word," he snapped. "There won't be any trouble about it. But don't take that threatening tone with me. I'm a white man, I'll have you know that."

"No cattle thief is a white man," exploded Walt. "Now get moving, damn you, before I bash your face in."

Timothy Melvin stepped forward purposefully.

Agatha ran between them. "Here, here," she begged. "You men have nothing to fight about. Timothy Melvin, you come on and . . ."

"Let us alone, Maw," Melvin said grimly. "Walt seems to have a notion he can run over me."

Earnest took out his watch. "You got fifty-nine minutes now, Melvin. Better use your time to good advantage."

"No," growled Tim, setting his feet firmly in the ground. "I'll get off, Walt. But I won't be driven like a slinking coyote."

Earnest took his lariat, unwound it slowly.

"What are you going to do?" screamed Agatha.

"I'm going to pull that shack down," vowed Walt. "I'm gonna set fire to it and . . ."

"Walt, you danged fool!" screamed Melvin. "This is your land but that's my shack. Throw your rope around it and . . ."

He dived inside as he saw that Earnest meant to carry out the threat. He bobbed back out of the door, his buffalo gun in his hand. Walt had looped one of the eaves and was backing his horse away. The two-room shack was stoutly built and the animal had to strain against the strength of the timbers.

"Damn you!" raged Tim.

As he lifted his buffalo gun to his shoulder Keith Maitland jerked out his revolver and shot swiftly. The rifle's charge went soaring off into empty space. Melvin fell to the ground.

Agatha Melvin moaned and slumped over in a dead faint.

Melba Melvin came running across the clearing.

"You beasts!" she sobbed. "You've killed him."

Earnest was shocked. His grip on the lariat loosened. Already his hands were blistered and shaking. He stared down at the dying Melvin as if he couldn't believe his eyes.

"Had to do it, Walt," Keith said with sincere regret. "He had a bead on you and meant to kill you."

Walt nodded. Suddenly he felt weak and hollow inside. "Get your things out sometime today," he told Melba.

Then, wheeling his horse on its haunches, he galloped off.

MELBA rode slowly into Harry Odell's yard and dismounted. Odell had seen her coming and he came stalking from the corrals.

"Harry!" she sobbed, and ran into his arms before he could push her off.

"What happened?" he asked innocently.

"Walt Earnest and the Maitland men. They killed Father. They tell us we got to pack our things and get out of the country."

"I should think," Harry said coldly, now clear of her arms, "that is the thing to do."

"Harry!" she gasped. She studied his face, and saw there what she had been afraid of all the time. "I see," she said bitterly. "You'll be glad to see me go."

"It's the best thing, Melba."

"Yes," she said hollowly, "it's the best thing."

She turned back to her horse but she couldn't see a foot ahead of her. She clutched the gate post.

"Anything I can do to help, Melba? I'll send some men over to help you pack. I'll lend you a wagon. Have you got the money to see that Tim is buried?"

"No," she admitted before she thought.

"Here," he said quickly, pressing a roll of bills in her hand. He had already prepared himself for this, and he considered the sum he was giving her generous. Enough to see her father put away and buy herself and mother a stage ticket.

She clutched the money unthinking. Then, with a sob, she threw it to the ground.

"No!" she cried.

She threw herself into the saddle and dug spurs into the pony. Odell shrugged his shoulders, retrieved the roll of bills. After all, if she wanted to be a fool!

The speed of her ride, and the coolness of the wind in her face, partially soothed Melba's anger. In its place came a dull hatred, a deep resentment. And then, as she realized her plight, abject helplessness. What made her think of Ben Anthony she did not know. Certainly Ben had never been more to her than a pleasant acquaintance, a big man she liked for his kindness, and admired for his success.

She found Ben in his small office laboriously bringing up to date his stage coach records.

"Ben!" she gulped. "I had to . . . I want to . . ."

"Sure, sure," he murmured. He pushed the papers aside. "Come here," he ordered, and reached for her.

Grown girl though she was, Melba fell into his lap and cried, her head on his shoulder.

"I tried to stop them, honey," he said. "But no man can stop Walt Earnest when his dander is up."

"What was it for, Ben? We've never

harmed Walt. Father thought Walt was his friend."

"A mistake," Ben said. "I'm sure of it. But mistakes happen. Don't you worry, I'll take care of your mother and you. What do you want to do—go to another country?"

"I don't know," Melba sighed. "I hadn't thought."

Then, before she could stop herself, she blurted out the story of her relations with Odell. Ben listened with tight lips. He was not too surprised. He knew that his friend was a man who was found attractive by women, and was attracted by them. Though Harry had never told as much in actual words, Ben was sure that Melba was not Odell's first conquest.

"He won't marry me and I don't want him to," Melba sobbed. "It was Pap's idea. I don't want to see him again."

"There's a stage for San Antone tomorrow," Ben proposed. "We can get Tim buried first. I'll help you find a job in San Antone."

"Couldn't I stay here, Ben? This is the only country I ever knew. We've suffered some, but I don't like to think of going somewhere else."

"What could you do here? Work in the restaurant? Work for me? Marry? The last is the answer, Melba. There is no place in this country for a woman who isn't married."

She was calm and even sensible, but showed no disposition to leave his lap.

"I've had one offer," she said bitterly. "Fritz Warner. Most men don't come to a squatter's girl and offer marriage."

"Do you like Fritz?"

"I don't know,' she confessed. "At the time I was so excited about Harry that I laughed in his face. When I compared him to Harry he was dull."

"But Fritz is honest and a hard worker," Ben pointed out. "He'll get somewhere. He's on a cash basis where most of the men in this valley, even Odell, are straining their credit."

"I would take Fritz," Melba sighed, "if he would still have me. But I'd have to tell him about—Harry. I wouldn't want him to find out later."

Ben stood up, gently placing her on the floor. "I'll talk to Fritz. Sometimes he and I see things alike."

"Will you, Ben?"

"Sure. And don't worry, I think everything will turn out right."

"Go see about a funeral for your Dad," he said, handing her money. "And bring your mother into town. I'll ride out to see Fritz."

Where Melba Melvin had flung Harry Odell's money to the ground, she accepted Ben Anthony's bills.

"Morgan Mann will have a casket," Ben suggested. "I'll tell him to put the price down right."

"Thank you, Ben."

"First, you go to the restaurant and eat a steak. I'll bet you're starving."

She nodded mutely.

Ben walked with her to the restaurant, then continued into Morgan's store.

"HEAR about Timothy Melvin?" he asked.

The fleshy store-keeper clucked sympathetically. "Too bad. I believe old Walt jumped in over his head there."

"The Melvins are flat, I guess. Tim's girl is coming in here to see about a casket. She's got some cash. Put the price down cheap, Morgan, dirt cheap. I'll stand good for the difference."

"If there *is* a difference," Morgan shot back. Then, with a grin: "What are you trying to do, Ben, play Santa Claus to the whole damned country? Next thing you know, you'll be going after this Caddo Parker outfit."

"No," Ben said curtly. "My cash came cheap, I'll lend it the same way. But not my hide. Fighting Parker isn't my business."

"I wish it was," sighed Morgan. "Ben, this whole danged country is going straight to hell unless somebody stops this dirty work. I'm flat again. You might as well cancel that load I ordered from Port Lavaca."

"If you go under, how can this valley eat?"

"I've done all I can," shrugged Morgan. "Two years ago, I was a rich man. I ain't shutting off a man's credit, Ben." He waved around his store, and Ben could see that some of his counters and shelves were empty. "What's left goes out on the cuff like the rest of it. But when this is gone, I'm through."

"You'll never go broke as long as I got a freight line," growled Ben. "I'll bring your load from Lavaca."

"It's on consignment," warned Mann. "You'll have to pay cash for it."

"I can do that," Ben said.

"Don't be a fool, Ben. You've worked hard for your stake. You're not big enough to hold this country up. No man is. All of us working together might. But with Marvin Sledge. . . ."

"Yeah," the big man said bitterly, "I got my own notions about Sledge. Some of his talk is coming back to me."

"I suppose," the storekeeper said slowly, "that you got the same suspicion I have? That this Cattlemen's Investment Company is really Sledge? That he's trading paper so he won't have to foreclose personally?"

"That's my hunch," Ben agreed.

"Mine, too." Morgan sighed again. "But what of it? What can we do about it? There won't be a yearling sold in this valley except for skinning. If every man sold his herd for hides and tallow, it would be only a drop in the bucket compared to the paper Sledge holds against their grass. He's got this country on a down-hill pull, Ben. I'm warning you, don't throw all your capital into this valley."

"I'm throwing it into this store as long as there's any of it left," Ben promised grimly.

"You mean that, don't you?" Morgan asked.

"Damned right."

"Then you got to take a partnership, Ben. If we can weather this panic, this will be the richest store in Texas. All of these men will pay up when they get the money. And they ain't the type of men to forget who carried 'em through. I've got notions, Ben. I've been thinking of expanding into a big outfit. Selling by mail and delivering by freight all over this country. We could hog the trade from San Antonio to Corpus Christi and plumb to Brownsville."

Ben hesitated. "If you're gonna back me," Morgan added, "you got to take half the benefits, if any."

Anthony nodded. "It's a deal."

"Then throw the goods in here," Morgan said fiercely. "I believe in this country, Ben. So do you. Storekeepers are cutting off credit everywhere. The firm of Mann & Anthony will let 'em have what they want on just their word. You were a button when this country was started, Ben, you don't remember how men fought for it then. They'll fight again. And they'll win, Ben. The breed of men like Keith Maitland and Walt Earnest don't know what it means to lose."

"Sure they'll win," Ben murmured. "And us with it. I got a good partner, Morgan."

"So have I," was the hearty response. "I'll make out some lists, Ben. You're a shrewd trader. By paying cash in advance of delivery, you can run the prices down in Port Lavaca and San Antone."

"I'll see you tonight," Ben promised, remembering that he had to ride out and see Fritz Warner.

"Sure," agreed Morgan. "We'll put our heads together over a bottle and work this thing out."

Ben found Fritz Warner branding yearlings in a stout corral built out of cedar and mesquite posts. Fritz did what no other ranchman was willing to accept as necessary, work with his own hands from before sunup until after dark. The German's herd was small but he seldom lost a calf to coyotes or disease. And his spread was entirely too small for outlaws like Caddo Parker to bother with.

Anthony talked a moment of casual things. It was hard to get around to a subject like this.

Finally he said, with some embarrassment: "I guess you heard Melvin was shot down?"

"Yes. I'm sorry."

"That leaves Melba without a roof," Ben added. "A fine girl. She'll make some lucky man a good wife."

"I think so," Fritz nodded. He twisted his rough gnarled hands. "Once, I asked her myself. She thought it was funny. She laughed."

"Women," observed Ben, "are like us men; sometimes they go off half-cocked. What if Melba was willing to change her mind, Fritz?"

"How would you know that?"

"I said supposing," Anthony shrugged.

"I need a wife," was the slow answer. "I need a woman like Melba. I would be very happy, Anthony."

"I think she'd take you up, Fritz."

"You do!"

"Yes."

Anthony hesitated again. This next part was even harder than the first had been.

"As I said, Fritz," he said gently, "women sometimes go off half-cocked. They make mistakes. Men get off the right range themselves. I don't believe in holding a mistake against a man. Or a woman. Do you?"

Fritz frowned. It took him a moment to realize what Anthony was hinting. Then he asked, in a low growl:

"Were you the man, Anthony?"

"No."

"Who was he?"

"I reckon, Fritz," Ben shrugged, "you ought not to ask that. Not of me. Certainly not of Melba."

"I won't," Warner agreed. "I know what I am, a slow-thinking man whose only virtue is my willingness to work, and to wait with a patience other man do not have. I shall ride into town and ask Melba again tonight. Thank you, Ben Anthony."

"Sure, sure," Ben grinned.

V

BEN left Warner's and rode the rim road toward Harry's. He found Odell in the comfortable house, at his ease with a drink in his hand.

What Ben felt for this good-looking, seemingly indifferent man was hard to explain. Certainly it was not the admiration of one strong man for another, friendship founded upon mutual respect. Things had always come easy to Harry Odell, dirt hard to Ben Anthony. The superior faculties Ben Anthony possessed had been developed by grim necessity. Perhaps Ben's feeling for this close friend was a desire to protect Odell from what he had never been exposed to, and wouldn't know how to cope with if it came along.

"Sit down for a drink," Harry said cordially. "I'm gonna ride over to Walt's for supper. Come along."

"I will," Ben nodded. Harry brought him a whiskey and he tossed it off.

"Drinking much, podner?" Ben demanded, eyeing the half-empty bottle.

"Always trying to reform me," grinned Odell. "No, you big ox. I'm doing all right."

"Good," Ben nodded. He accepted a cigar, lit its tip and regarded the amber glow thoughtfully. "I was just out to see Fritz Warner. He and Melba Melvin are gonna get married."

Odell started. Then a smile of relief broke across his face.

"Thank God!" he sighed.

He did not care that his relief told Anthony a story he was not sure Ben already knew.

"You nearly got in trouble there," Ben said quietly. "You're getting married in the Spring. Can't you leave these valley girls alone that long?"

"I sure can," was the hearty response. So happy was Odell to be rid of Melba that he didn't even mind Ben issuing advice on something he thought none of Ben's affair.

They rode across the ridges to Walt's.

Walt Earnest, repentive and glum, gave them no more than a nod and went stalking off to the corral with the muttered explanation that he had to see about his horse. Throughout the meal Walt was quiet and troubled. He went to bed with the first layers of darkness.

"I'm glad you two came out," Bess said. "He's been troubled all day."

"It was too bad about Melvin," Odell murmured. "Don't let Walt get too mopey about it. Timothy isn't the first squatter to pay the price for sneaking onto a man's range."

"But it was so unnecessary," sighed Bess. "If Dad could have kept his temper, it would have been worked out all right."

"Here, let's don't mope ourselves," Harry said gaily. "Do you know I haven't kissed you this week?"

And he seized Bess in his arms. "Harry, you fool!" protested the girl. But she was not angry with him; no woman could be. She fought him off a minute and then surrendered her lips to his.

His arms still around her, Odell grinned at his friend. "That's one thing I could teach you, Ben. You know how to make money where I go broke. You know how to use a gun and a rope and you can ride any horse you ever saw. But do you know how to kiss a woman? I'm afraid not."

They were outside, in the dusk of the front porch, and Odell could not see Anthony's face. It was just as well. Yearning

was written there, and envy. What Ben ached for, what he had dreamed about.

Harry chuckled. "Yes, you could learn from me, podner."

He pushed Bess toward Ben. "Here, you big ox. Try your hand and see if you can come up to Odell's standard."

Bess did not push back. She seemed to be caught in the wave of Harry's mood, as they had usually been throughout their lives. "I think Harry needs to be taken down a notch, Ben," she laughed, and slipped into his arms.

The big man held her there, unwilling to accept, yet obviously not intending to refuse. Bess lifted her lips and of a sudden his arms tightened until she was strained against him and his mouth covered hers with the sincere force and the spirit that was Ben Anthony's.

Bess started to push him back. But there was no doing that. She melted against him, and for a long moment they stayed like that.

Finally Anthony let her go.

He said, "I'm sorry."

For a long moment not a word was spoken. Then Ben said: "I'll be riding. Thanks for the supper." It was an awkward exit. He knew it.

ODELL sensed that Bess was disturbed. It was her preoccupation that caused his eyes to narrow in jealous speculation.

Another man might have challenged her then and there, and, in that sudden strange mood of hers she would have been quick with her defiance. But Odell had that inborn smoothness.

"Understand Fritz Warner is to marry Melba Melvin."

She seized the opportunity gratefully. "I'm glad. Melba is a nice girl."

"I don't know," Harry grinned. "I understand Melvin had his shotgun oiled."

"Harry!"

"Well, that's the rumor," he shrugged. Even after the first mistake of an insinuation, he could not stop himself. Even as he knew in his own mind he had made an error, he couldn't hold back.

"Who with?" Bess demanded. "She hasn't gone steady with anybody."

Odell's eyelids flickered. "You don't keep a close watch on your admirers," he said lightly, but with grim inspiration underneath his banality. "Ben Anthony comes and goes as he pleases."

"Ben! That's impossible, Harry. Ben would never . . . !"

Harry shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know. I didn't ask him. I'm only telling you what everybody in town is talking about."

"I don't believe it." There was a note in her voice that indicated she did not *intend* to believe it.

Ben, meanwhile, was galloping his horse back to town, grateful for the night coolness which eased the hot rush of his blood. He had tipped his hand, and he wondered what the consequences might be.

He found Morgan Mann waiting for him in the saloon with a long list of articles they should stock, as well as a partnership agreement.

"That isn't necessary," Ben objected, pushing aside the latter. "If we don't trust each other, we haven't got much of a partnership."

"I'm thinking about the future," Morgan said. "When I'm dead, which won't be too long, I don't want relations I don't give a damn about trying to cut in on you, Ben. For, if this panic breaks, if these human wolves like Caddo Parker get their just desserts and prices come back to normal, you're gonna be the richest man in this cattle country."

Ben smiled faintly. Money, money! That he could make with obvious ease. He didn't doubt his luck in that respect. He had always had it, even in gambling houses up the cattle trails. It was with a girl like Bess Earnest that his luck ran out.

"My plans," said Morgan, "call for twenty thousand cash. Do you have it?"

"Yes," Ben said.

"That," Mann sighed, "will carry this country through the spring. I think that's all we'll need."

"I'll get the money at the bank the first thing in the morning," Anthony promised.

"Just transfer it to the store account," Morgan suggested. "You're saving this country, Ben."

The big man grinned. "Call me Santa Claus."

"No," Mann murmured. "Nor nobody else in the country will call you that. We'll be calling you *Mister* Anthony."

MARVIN Sledge listened inscrutably, showing no hint of the consternation he felt. So Anthony's money was going into Mann's store, and the new partnership was making credit easy for destitute ranchmen. That meant Ben was stepping squarely into the path of Sledge, Odell and Parker. Sledge eyed Ben speculatively.

"I suppose," he said, drumming his fingers on the scarred desk, "there is no use to advise you against this deal, Ben."

"None," Ben said firmly. "I'm gambling on the future of this country."

Marvin's eyes gleamed behind his spectacles. His was too big a deal to permit a man like Anthony to interfere. Odell thought he was dealing in big stakes, but his was a piker's game compared to what Marvin Sledge was aiming for. This valley would all be Sledge's if another spring came and went without an increase in cattle prices, except for the part of it Odell would own. Even that Sledge aimed to eventually get. He did not believe Odell capable of managing a large ranch. Odell, he thought, would break himself.

As soon as Anthony had left, Sledge sent his messenger for Parker. The dark-browed outlaw slipped into the bank by a rear entrance and conferred with Marvin in a small private room where Sledge stored his securities.

There Sledge delivered his orders. The Anthony freight wagons must not reach Alice!

"There will be money," Marvin explained. "Ben and Morgan are on a cash basis in Port Lavaca. The money is your part."

Caddo liked this.

"You want the wagons burned?"

"Yes. They mustn't reach Alice."

"They won't," Caddo grinned.

Parker swaggered into Anthony's wagon yard. Ben and Tommy Melvin, Timothy's son, were working over two heavy wagons. As Caddo watched, the Brownsville stage rolled in, a heavy serviceable Concord. Caddo mused upon what such an outfit must cost, what capital must have been necessary to launch this business. Yes, sir, Anthony had real dough tied up in this game.

He watched the wagon roll out, almost empty. He turned to the saloon and gave orders to Stubby Wright, one of the few confederates he could trust. Tommy Melvin would be carrying the cash to pay for the load he would pick up in Lavaca. Thus, if Caddo was to get his cut, they must hold up the wagon before it reached the port.

Two men should be enough. Caddo and Stubby left Alice a half-hour behind Anthony's wagon. They cooked their noon meal in the brushy flats below Robstown and waited at the junction of the Neuces River and Cunningham Creek for the heavy vehicle to come lumbering down the road.

"On your toes, Wright," Parker warned, at the same time suppressing a smile of satisfaction for the job ahead. Wright and Parker were safely perched atop a small cliff overlooking the road Anthony's wagon would traverse. A shoulder-high ledge acted as a perfect shield for the bushwackers. Caddo Parker figured this to be about the simplest job he had ever undertaken . . . and the best part of it was that he would not have to pay off a large crew of men.

The pair stiffened momentarily as the wagon rounded a bend in the road. Two rifles immediately set sights on young Tommy Melvin, the driver. Then Parker triggered. The shot was perfect and Melvin went tumbling from his perch onto the roadside. The kid never had a chance . . . never knew what hit him.

Stubby Wright raced down to the road and brought up the horses short before they had an opportunity to break away. Parker followed slowly. Then he and Wright drove the wagon off the road and set fire to it in a wooded draw. Parker carefully went through Tommy Melvin's pockets. He withdrew a wallet and took out the contents. A thousand dollars. Parker grinned: "Beats slaughtering steers for their stinkin' hides, eh Stubby?"

Parker did not notice that he had left an empty shell in the ambush of rocks. Or that, as he and Stubby rode off, they left a trail that any pilgrim might follow. Perhaps Parker didn't care particularly. Certainly he was not afraid of a showdown battle with Anthony, but more than likely the times had made him careless . . . times when the cattlemen had neither the time nor the crews to fight off outlaw packs.

VI

BEN ANTHONY waited four days. When Melvin failed to return, he took up the trail. He had no difficulty finding the charred wreckage, and evidence that showed his driver had been burned with the wagon.

He also found the empty shell, a 30-30. This meant little. Anthony owned a 30-30 himself. He followed the tracks until they faded out in the main road.

He returned to Alice and reported the bad news to Morgan Mann. They had lost a thousand dollars, a driver and a costly wagon and team.

Caddo flashed a grin as Ben came into the saloon.

"Howdy, Anthony."

Ben gave him a moment's delay, hoping he would show some knowledge of the burned wagon and the murdered driver. But, while his eyes and his grin plainly showed he was gloating over the big man's loss, Caddo did not tip his hand.

Ben breathed heavily. All along the urge had been strong within him to fight this outlaw crew which was preying upon the helpless ranchmen. He had told himself again and again that it wasn't his fight. But now one of his wagons had been held up, his money stolen, one of his men killed. It was with a sort of joy that he realized this was now his fight.

"You were smart for awhile, Caddo," he said. "You picked on the cripples and in the dead of night. But you overplayed your hand when you shot Tommy Melvin and burned my wagon."

"Don't know what you're talking about, Anthony. If you're looking for trouble—any time, any time."

Ben took a step forward, his intentions unmistakable. Caddo waited, body tense, the grin still on his face.

Harry Odell stopped them. Odell came into the saloon and sized up the situation at a glance.

"What's going on here?" he demanded.

"Anthony has ambitions," shrugged Caddo. "He thinks he's tough."

Harry studied his friend's face, and knew what those white anger lines meant.

"What's up, Ben?"

"One of my wagons burned," Ben said tersely. "Tommy Melvin killed. Caddo has hung around this valley too long."

"Come along with me," Odell urged, taking his arm. "Cool off a minute."

Ben resisted. "Sure," Caddo drawled. "Think it over, Anthony. You're healthy and making money. The day you stand up to me you're giving up both of those comforts."

Harry's grip on Ben's shoulder tightened. "Come on."

Ben went unwillingly. Outside Harry pressed his big friend for further details. Anthony explained, then refused Odell's offer of a drink and went across to Morgan's store. Harry went on to the bank.

"What's this about Anthony?" he demanded of Sledge.

"I forgot, a friend of yours," shrugged the banker. "Anthony is teaming with Morgan Mann, Odell. Putting money into Morgan's store and offering to carry ranchmen another year on the credit. That throws a monkey wrench into our plans. None of Anthony's wagons get to Alice."

"He's tough," Harry said. He knew Ben where other men didn't. He knew the force of the big man, and the determination. He knew that Anthony was fast with a gun.

"Sure, he's tough," Sledge agreed. "So is Parker. We have too much tied up to risk having Anthony ruin us."

"I don't know," sighed Odell. He had a lot at stake, too, more than Caddo or Sledge.

He gnawed at his lip. He never considered the prospect of failure before. Everything had seemed so cut and dried, their plans so fool proof. But he didn't like the thought of fighting Ben Anthony. He had too much confidence in this big man who had been his friend since boyhood.

"That's the way it is, Odell," snapped Sledge. "If your conscience is troubling you, you can pull out now."

"I can't pull out and you know it."

"Then you'd better let me do the thinking and Caddo the shooting," Sledge grated.

Harry nodded. But, riding to the Earnest ranch for supper, he wasn't convinced. He began to regret ever leaguing with Sledge and Parker in this inhuman scheme to lay the valley destitute, and then seize it by foreclosure. Perhaps he had tried to get too big for his breeches. Perhaps he should

be content with what he already had, the Dollar-Mark well-stocked and on a cash basis where neighboring ranches were failing, and the Wide S which would be his at Walt Earnest's death.

It was not conscience, but selfishness that convinced Harry Odell he should change back to the lawful side of the fence. He could not reconcile himself to the picture of Ben Anthony failing financially, or going down before Caddo's guns. All of his life he had depended upon Ben. And he had never seen the situation arise which Anthony couldn't handle.

Walt talked about the wagon holdup after supper.

"It's a good thing for us it happened," he said. "We've needed Anthony with us."

Earnest shot a quick look at his daughter. "Ben is the man who can take up this fight and win it," he declared. "It takes a young man. Me, I'm too old."

He looked off across the level mesquite country and sighed. "This is a country for young men. An old man can't hold his head up here. I wish Ben would come out. I'd like to see him."

"Are you thinking," asked Harry, "of getting Ben to lead the ranchmen against Parker?"

"That's the only answer," snapped Earnest. "It's his fight now as well as ours. We can throw our men together. Keith Maitland and Al Cameron and I have fought rustlers side by side before. The Maitland and Cameron boys make seven. You make eight. Fritz Warner will come with us. Anthony has some drivers. They'll fight for him; he's the type of man whose hands always fight for him. That should make twelve anyhow. Twelve men can wipe out the Parker gang."

Harry nodded. It was just this he had feared. It was just this that made his leap back to the other side of the fence a quick grim necessity.

"You're forgetting one thing," Bess said.

"What?"

"Ben Anthony will never ask you for help. Who will organize this army of yours?"

"Ben will have to ask us," growled Walt. "He can't fight the Parker gang by himself."

"He'll try," Bess murmured. "You're a stubborn old codger, Dad. You've got your pride and you'd rather die than pull it in. But you can look back into the past and recall that Ben never folded up and wilted before your pride. Other men have. Ben wouldn't even when he was a boy."

"You're right," Walt sighed. "I'll ride in and ask Ben to lead us."

Odell's eyes shone. He already had a scheme to betray Parker and Sledge.

"I'll tell Ben what you said," he proposed. "I'll ride in tomorrow and bring him out here for supper. Get the Maitlands and the Camerons over. We'll talk turkey here tomorrow night."

Walt Earnest nodded. Bess studied Harry's face. She was pleased by his initiative. She was pleased that he was showing a calm acceptance of the responsibility that had to be his when and if this fight with Parker came. It was overdue, and Odell should have been their leader instead of Ben Anthony.

MELBA Melvin made no pretense to happiness. She had accepted Fritz Warner, and she was living in his two-room cabin which looked down upon the Odell's Dollar Mark. Perhaps if she had not been able to look out and see the Odell house she would have been more satisfied. Each glimpse brought back the memory of Harry, and stolid industrious Fritz suffered in comparison.

He was a dull man. His was a dull life. He was at work at dawn, which meant cooking his breakfast in the chill and dark of early morning, and packing him a lunch in a tin pail, for he did not wish to waste the time it would require to ride back home. He was in late and by the time he had wolfed his meal with the appetite of a famished man, it was bedtime again. It was an empty, frugal life, and Melba had had an overdose of both. She had wanted a little ease and a little laughter, the life of a Harry Odell or a Bess Earnest. Fritz owned his land and his cattle where her father had possessed neither, but otherwise it was a squatter's life all over again.

Once, when she complained, Fritz told her with some pride: "It will not always be so. I am getting ahead. Soon I can hire a rider. I have cut mesquite and cactus out of my creek valley. Already I can feed more cattle to the acre than Walt Earnest."

She took to riding over the country for

hours at a time, running Fritz' saddle horse until the bay animal was lathered with sweat.

Melba at first had no desire to see Harry Odell. Instead, she felt a horror of that time when they must meet. But with the passing days of fear turned to a sort of yearning, and she rode deeper and deeper into Dollar Mark grass, at times watching from her horse as Odell and his crews combed the brush and thickets for strays.

He saw her on the afternoon after his talk with Walt Earnest. A grin touched his face and he told his boys to carry on and rode up to join her. She sat in her saddle stiffly, wanting to run, yet frozen into immobility.

Harry swung out of his saddle and caught her bridle.

"I'm glad to see you," he grinned. "I heard you had married Fritz. I wondered if I would see you again."

"I married Fritz," she said stiffly, looking away from his dark eyes.

"Happy?"

"No."

Harry took her hand. "Come down," he urged.

"No," she refused.

But, even as she uttered the negative, she knew she would. His hand pulled her gently, and she obeyed.

She stood stiff and straight glaring at him, hating him for the confidence of his smile and his eyes.

"I thought you'd miss me," he murmured, putting a hand on each shoulder. "I didn't think you could marry that thick-headed Bohunk and be happy with him."

Melba did not answer. Harry's arms tightened around her and he pulled her closer.

"Haven't you got a kiss for a man you haven't seen in days?"

She made no gesture, but she offered no resistance. Harry's arms went even tighter. "You're a sweet girl," he said huskily. "I was a fool to give you up."

Still she let him have his way. There was nothing of her old flaming love in her surrender. Hers was a mute acceptance of his will again. But for not a moment did she doubt that she had come to hate him. This had been necessary to make her realize

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what he was, and what she had been.

An hour later Harry pulled his hat over his eyes and gave her cheek a soft kiss.

"Got work to do," he said lightly. "I'll see you again."

"No," she answered. "You won't see me again."

"Oh, you'll get lonesome and come around," he grinned. "Better go home and cook the Bohunk's supper. They tell me he eats like a horse."

MELBA stood straightening her hair and watching him as he rode back to his crew. Hers was an intense unwavering stare. She did not notice that, no more than a hundred yards away, half-way up the slope, Fritz Warner had reined up his horse, and was watching.

Melba suddenly was in motion. She burst into tears and fairly leaped into the saddle and spurred the bay mare into a wild run. For a mile she raced the thoroughbred. The wind whipped her face and flying dust stung her cheeks.

It was near dark when she reached the two-room cabin. But she took the time to rub down the mare, and curry its soft mane. She gave the horse a double ration of oats and pressed her face against the still sweating skin.

"From now on," she sobbed, "I'll be good to you. I'll treat you like a baby."

Then she almost ran for the house. Fritz would be in soon, and there would be a hot meal ready for him such as he had never eaten before.

But darkness dropped from the swelling rims and still no Fritz. The steak she had fried cooled. The boiled potatoes ceased to steam. The coffee she finally poured herself was luke-warm.

Fritz entered. One look at his face and she knew something had happened. She could guess what.

"You're late, Fritz," she said gently.

"Yes," he nodded. "I am late."

"Did you work hard today?"

"No."

He had taken one step inside the doorway, now he came forward another pace, slowly, reluctantly. His face dark in the wavering lamp light. Melba studied him. He knew, she was so sure of that. She poured another cup of coffee and motioned him to the table.

"Sit down, Fritz," she said with a strange calmness.

"I can't sit," he answered bitterly. "There is nothing here for me. What is here belongs to another man."

"Please, Fritz."

She was not tearful, she was not frantic. "You know?"

"Yes."

"Think the worst, and it's true," she said.

"Odell — was the man — Anthony said . . . ?"

"Yes," Melba admitted.

Her dark eyes studied his face. There was a gentleness there she had not expected. Another man would have been in a furious rage. Fritz was hurt, deeply hurt.

"I went to him, Fritz," she continued. "I went to him like any cheap hussy. For days he has been all I could think about. I tried to keep within these walls, and to remember I had made a sort of bargain when I married you. But something pulled me over there—to his range—to where he could see me. He came, of course. I knew he would. Harry Odell is like that."

Fritz nodded. Yes, Odell was. His deep-set eyes studied his wife's face.

"I'm glad I went, Fritz," Melba went on in that same gentle voice. "I couldn't stand it here—before. Something within me cried out against it. I found myself hating you. I wished I were dead. But now—"

She waited a moment, then a smile curved her red lips. "I'm glad you saw us, Fritz. For it saved me the trouble of telling you. It saved me the trouble of explaining — how I feel — now. You're a man, Fritz. You're a good man. I know how men feel about women who do things like that. There'll be no more rides—to Harry or any man. I know what I want now, Fritz. This home here. The life before us, full of hard work and penny pinching until we can afford the things we both want."

Fritz bent his head. "Is it too late, Fritz?" she asked softly. "I don't know about those things. I only know that I . . . I . . . I hope it isn't."

Fritz raised his eyes, and Melba shrank back. She saw the hardness there, and she was frightened by it.

"I have been pushed too far," he mut-

tered. "Always people have made fun of me. Perhaps they are laughing now. Odell certainly. Perhaps others."

He looked down at his gnarled twisted hands with a sigh. "I have done the best I could. I have never bothered any man. I have let men push me around. For that I was wrong. I set too high a value on material things. I yielded in all matters except those. I was trying to buy the respect that men did not pay me on first sight, and women never at all."

He twisted his hands and there was a strained quality in his voice.

"None of that will be so again," he said grimly. "There are some men who must be shown that Fritz Warner is a man himself, and able to fight and hold what is his own."

She shrunk back from the threat, and the promise, of that speech. She had not expected it from Fritz. In other ways she had underestimated this silent broad-shouldered man.

Fritz pushed closer to the table. He tasted his coffee, and pushed the cup toward her.

"It is cold," he said. "Better you should warm it again."

VII

HARRY ODELL motioned to Caddo Parker to join him in the rear of the saloon.

"Ain't you taking a heap of risk?" drawled Caddo.

"Yes," was the curt reply. "But I'm not out here to palaver. I've run two hundred head of Earnest's stock into that draw behind my North line cabin. When can you pick 'em up?"

"Tonight," Caddo said.

Harry considered. That would not give him enough time. "Make it tomorrow night."

"Sure, any time."

"Right after midnight," Odell said. "I'll have a crew of riders out until then, making sure nobody is around."

"You figure the angles, don't you?" murmured Caddo.

"Sure," grinned Harry.

He slipped behind the saloon and came out in front of Anthony's wagon yard.

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Ben was laboring over his records in the small office.

"Do you work all the time, podner?" he grinned from the door.

"Just about," Ben shrugged. "Things ain't going so good."

He pushed his papers aside and regarded his friend with sober eyes. "I talked to Walt this afternoon. He told me you were showing some interest in going after Caddo.

"That's right," Harry nodded. "But I told him I'd see you. Why did he have to duck in for a talk?"

"I reckon," Ben said slowly, "it's because he didn't trust you to see it through."

"I'm not shouting it around," Odell snapped, "but I'm leading the fight."

He had decided to go that far, to lead the attack on Caddo Parker.

"Good," nodded Anthony.

The big man studied Harry's face. "I'm glad to hear it, podner," he murmured. "I've been nosing around some since my wagon was burned and my driver killed. I didn't like what I found out."

Harry's face flushed.

"I didn't get in deep," he claimed. "I played with Caddo some. I wanted him to get enough rope so we could hang him."

"I'm not talking, you know that," Ben said. "But don't get off the range again, podner. And this business tonight—"

"Tomorrow night," Harry interrupted.

"Tomorrow night then," agreed Ben. "It's gotta go through."

"It will," Harry said confidently.

"The sheriff is back in town," said Anthony. "The county isn't paying him any more and he isn't pushing his star. Can't blame him. But Jess Allman is a good man. If he knows we're going after Parker, he'll deputize us and make it legal. If I were you, I'd see Allman."

Harry's eyes flashed in gratitude. He should have known Anthony would back his play.

"You're all wool and a yard wide, Ben," he said huskily. It was hard to believe that this show of emotion wasn't pretense, to some extent, at least. But then it was hard to know when Harry Odell was genuinely sincere or just putting on an act. He chuckled. "I'll name my first boy after you."

A shadow crossed the big man's face. Why did Harry have to rub this in, that Bess Earnest wasn't for one Ben Anthony, and never would be?

"Sure, sure," he nodded. "Now get on over and see Allman."

Odell found the sheriff cursing strips of rawhide he was trying to plait into a lariat. For three months now the county had been unable to pay Jess Allman's salary. He had let his deputies go, then had turned to other duties himself to keep a roof over his head and food on his table. But Jess still considered himself sheriff of Jim Wells county and his eyes gleamed in anticipation as Harry outlined his plans.

Odell sketched a map in the ground. "The cattle are in this long draw. My men ran 'em over there this afternoon. Caddo has no way of knowing that it was with Walt's permission. His men will come down from this way, from the rim. They'll bunch the cattle ahead of 'em and work toward the narrow end. You know that gulch at the mouth of Tonto Springs? Walt has an old line cabin up there."

Harry didn't take time to grin in recollection. Here he had met Melba. Here Timothy Melvin had given him a respite to break off with Bess and marry Melba. Here Caddo had planted the evidence which had led to Tim Melvin's death.

"Parker will drive the steers through that gulch," Odell went on. "We can ambush 'em there. Caddo won't have over eight or ten men. There will be a bunch of us."

"Ten including me," Jess said. "And Tuck Crawford. He ain't doing anything and he'll ride along. He was a damned good deputy."

"Sure, bring Tuck," acceded Harry.

He rode back to Anthony's office. "Everything is set with Jess, just as you laid it out to me," he said. "Meet at my place at sundown tomorrow."

Ben nodded.

Odell rode to the Maitland and Cameron ranch and delivered the same message.

"Thought Anthony was going to ramrod us?" Keith Maitland said.

"It's my fight more than Anthony's," shrugged Harry. Then, crisply: "We'll deal you out if you say so, Keith. No man has gotta ride with us who isn't in the notion."

"We'll be there," Maitland answered curtly.

The Camerons offered no objections. With a chuckle at his own impudence, Harry rode to Fritz Warner's. He saw Melba on the porch as Fritz toiled over a break in his corral fence and waved at her jauntily. His beady eyes mocked Fritz as he invited the German to ride with them.

Fritz nodded, his broad face impassive. Melba watched from the house, hoping that Fritz would not lose his head, and yet praying that he would. She had learned much about her husband in these past twenty-four hours. She was convinced that Fritz intended to kill Harry. And she intended to offer no plea in Odell's defense.

Harry rode on to the Wide S and explained to Walt what he had done.

"Sounds good," Walt grunted.

Harry motioned to Bess and she followed him outside.

Harry caught her in his arms. "It's gonna be a long time 'til Spring," he complained.

Bess did not fight him off. She couldn't do that. She had promised to marry Harry Odell and she would see that promise through. But she had learned in the mental torment of these past few days that it was Ben Anthony who could stir her emotions to a boiling point, not Odell.

"Yes, it will be a long time," she agreed. It would indeed. For, until Spring, she would have the pain and confusion of knowing that she could turn back if she wished, and that Ben would answer at the wave of her hand. She would probably find the time harder to pass than would Harry Odell. For Ben Anthony the hours would barely creep along.

They returned to the house to find Walt oiling his gun. Harry chatted a moment longer and then rode on to his ranch. Breasting a ridge he could look down upon the draw which would be set for Caddo Parker. He chuckled. He would be a hero when that night was over. He would have the pride of Walt Earnest, who had led the ranchmen in a roundup of the Tipton gang twelve years before. He would be to this cattle valley what Walt Earnest had been.

There would still be Marvin Sledge to deal with, but Harry was not afraid of exposure from this quarter. Sledge still had his notes, and could foreclose if they

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were not paid. But the banker could hardly reveal Odell's double game. That would incriminate Sledge.

THEY were ready to give Fritz Warner up when the stocky German came riding through the brush at a slow trot, his hunting rifle lying loosely over his knees. Odell had made the sneering remark that Fritz was never around when a fight was scheduled and had proposed they go on, but Ben had insisted they wait. Fritz did not answer the nods of greeting.

"Let's ride," Odell said.

There were twelve of them, for ex-sheriff Jess Allman had found two of Walt's former riders who were eager to be in on this show-down and two of Keith Maintland's nephews had left their trail herd bedded down at their uncle's to give Keith a jump. The odds would be heavily on their side and Odell was more than satisfied. Caddo Parker and his gang would find it impossible to escape the fury of this posse.

Reaching the gulch, they set up their ambush. Odell started issuing assignments but Ben interrupted to point out that men should be hidden on higher ground so as to prevent the cattle from shielding the outlaws from their fire. Odell was a little piqued at the way Keith Maitland and Walt Earnest seconded Ben's suggestion. This was supposed to be Harry's show but it was plain that every other man present looked to Anthony for leadership.

"I could take the ledge up there," said Ben, waving toward the cabin. "I used to be pretty fair at night shooting."

The big man seemed to sense that his friend resented his taking over.

"Where do you want the rest of us, Harry?" he asked quietly.

"Suit yourself," was the curt reply.

Ben shrugged. This was no time to humor a temperament. "Jess," Ben said to the sheriff, "suppose you and Walt and Keith squat behind those rocks there." He waved toward a mass of uprooted boulders inside the gulch. "Let Caddo and the steers come on by. Al and his cousins and I will take a bead on 'em from this ledge. Let us start the shooting. You watch for men breaking back. Cover the trail and shoot anybody you see. Harry, you take the rest and spread out ahead of us. Some of 'em might break through. Drop anything you see that's moving."

He waited a moment for approval of his plan. Their silence affirmed his organization.

Walt took the first step toward his post. "You want me back with Odell?" Fritz asked Anthony.

Ben nodded. Something like a grin split the German's frozen face.

Ben and Al Cameron climbed atop the ledge, leaving their horses tethered in the draw. The Maitland boys were stationed lower.

"Let's pray for moonlight," Ben told Al.

He could remember Cameron's prowess with a rifle. Once, at a turkey shoot, he and Al Cameron had tied for top honors.

"There'll be a moon later," nodded Cameron. "All we need to do is pray that Caddo don't come too early."

The gloom of night was heavy upon the gulch where the even dozen men waited grimly for the first tell-tale clatter of moving cattle. Ben looked up at the pale-tinted sky and guessed that it was ten o'clock, and that they would have at least two hours to wait.

The waiting was hard. No fires could be lit, no cigarette tips could be seen glowing. Each man sat quietly, but tensely, and passed the time examining his own thoughts. Ben recalled the thrill of Bess Earnest's kiss, and regretted again that he had accepted this partnership with Morgan Mann. There would be profits, but already he had more than enough money. This time, when he rode away, he mustn't return.

Further out, waiting on horseback, Harry Odell still fumed at the way authority had been taken out of his hands, by a simple suggestion from Anthony followed by the too-quick willingness of other men to listen to Ben rather than to him. But, Harry consoled himself, that was probably for the best. At least he wasn't up in the first line of fire. He grinned to himself. Again Ben was pulling his chestnuts out of the coals. He gave himself up to a moment's thought of how he would handle Marvin Sledge when Caddo was gone. He could shoot the banker, if necessary, and claim it was in a fight. There was no law in this county and he could always explain that he had learned

of Sledge's juggling of ranch paper. Perhaps that was the best way—to get rid of Sledge for keeps. Though he didn't see how the banker could afford to talk.

Fritz stayed very close to Odell. When the shooting started, Fritz intended to turn his rifle upon Odell.

VIII

UP ON the ledge Al Cameron clutched Ben's shoulder.

"Here it comes," he whispered.

Ben nodded. The first random shafts of moonlight were playing hide-and-seek with the shadows. Soon the entire gulch would be flooded with orange brilliance.

And none too soon. For, ahead of them, they could hear horses and cattle in motion. A voice floated to them, a harsh voice snapping out orders.

The Caddo Parker gang was rounding up Walt's stock, forcing the steers to their feet, herding them down the gulch.

Ben lay on his stomach and strained his eyes into the moonlight. Finally he lifted his hand in a signal that Al Cameron and the Maitland boys understood.

They were coming.

The sandy floor of the gulch quivered with the stomping of the aroused steers. They were well-fed and watered; they were in a humor to fight back this fan-shaped force of men prodding them ahead, swinging lariats in their faces, discharging revolvers in their ears. Ben took a careful sight upon the lead rider. It was not Caddo Parker.

"Now!" he yelled. And his shot rang out over the noise of moving cattle, scraping horses and cursing men. The outlaw riding ahead of the steers, swinging an oil lantern to guide the point men, simply melted from his saddle.

Caddo Parker was riding one of the points. He heard the shot, saw its deadly effect.

"There's hell to pay, men!" he yelled. "Break for cover."

He set the example, spurring his horse up the bank of the gulch. Al Cameron threw a quick shot at him and Caddo's horse went from under him. The outlaw threw himself from the saddle, landing on his side. Another bullet whined close to

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him. He gave up trying to climb the slope. There was no cover here and the moonlight made him a perfect target. Rolling down the ascent, he found cover among the frightened milling steers.

He had lost his rifle when his horse was shot from under him. Revolver in hand, he pushed among the steers, swinging its butt to clear a path.

"Odell!" he shouted. "Where are you, Odell?"

He had led six men into this trap. Two of them were already dead, one from Anthony's crack shot, another from Maitland's gun when he tried to bolt back to safety.

"Caddo!" yelled another of his riders. "They got us, Caddo."

Parker did not answer. When he had shouted for "Odell" a shot had come dangerously close to him. He offered a poor target as he went rolling in among the cattle, clinging to their horns to keep from going down. He was afraid of a stampede.

"Odell! Damn you, Odell, where are you?"

Caddo sensed the double-cross. This was too perfect an ambush to be otherwise. And Parker could tell by the spattering and roaring of the rifles from the ledge that his men had ridden into a death trap.

He threw himself to the ground and a bobbing longhorn turned him over. Another steer stepped across him and Caddo knew that one or more of his ribs were broken.

He heard Anthony's yell above him.

"Start the cattle. Make 'em stampede."

Parker pushed up and fought off a steer trying to gore him. His one thought was to reach Odell.

"Damn you, Odell!" he shouted, his voice a hoarse sob, "Why don't you answer me, Odell?"

Harry heard that shout and turned pale with fright. Caddo was still in that squirming mass, alive. Caddo was surviving that hail of rifle-fire and coming closer and closer.

He pulled on the reins, jerked his horse around and bolted.

Behind him came a rider cursing his mount for its slowness.

Fritz Warner!

Odell could have stayed in safety. For now Ben Anthony was slipping down the side of the gulch, stopping every now and then to listen for Caddo's hoarse voice. Caddo would never reach Odell. Ben would see to that.

Whenever a rider was seen in the milling mass he was immediately the target for a half-dozen rifles. Another of Caddo's men gulped his last. There were not cattle to create a stampede but their frightened milling and tossing of their horns made a stand by the outlaws impossible. When the steers turned and fought to go back through the wide stretch of the gulch they were forced by Jess Allman and Keith Maitland and Walt Earnest. A pistol shot grazed Maitland's shoulder but he kept his feet and fired his pistol point-blank into the faces of the frightened steers. A longhorn broke away, more venturesome than the rest, and sent Walt Earnest toppling. There was a break in the bank of horns and rumps and through it sprinted a desperate outlaw.

Al Cameron dropped the fleeing man on the run from the ledge above, a crack shot that Anthony would have applauded if the big man had seen it.

ANTHONY now was slipping among the pitching cattle. Ahead of him was Caddo's hoarse voice:

"Odell? Odell? I'll settle with you if it's the last thing I do."

Anthony was close enough to answer. "Why not me, Caddo?"

Parker threw a quick shot that brought a frightened bawl from a steer not five feet from Anthony. Ben ducked behind the shelter of a flailing longhorn and winged Caddo with his return fire.

The outlaw cursed again. "Lemme settle with Odell first, Anthony," he called out. "Lemme get to Odell. Then I'll give myself up. I swear I will."

A charging longhorn bowled Parker over. He gave a yell of fright. Sharp hoofs tore at him. He came to his feet, pitched to within ten yards of Anthony, and the flash of his gun blinded Ben as the big man charged.

Caddo slipped away from his clutches and threw himself over the hump of a protesting steer which promptly pitched the outlaw another ten feet away.

"Just lemme git to Odell," begged Caddo. This wish had become an obsession

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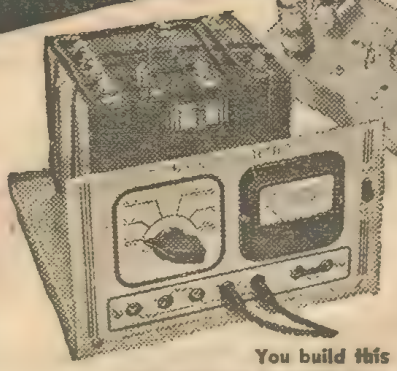

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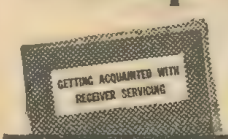

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with him. "I'm whipped. But I can take Odell and . . ."

His threat ended in a gasp. A sharp horn gouged his side and he went reeling. Another steer bumped him.

"Help me, Anthony!" he begged. "Over here, Anthony. Over here."

Sharp hoofs clawed at Caddo when he stumbled forward and then a trio of steers made for him with a frenzied attack he could not resist.

When Anthony fought off the steers and reached him, Caddo was a horrible, gory sight.

"Damn you, Odell," he murmured as Ben pulled him erect. "Where are you, Odell?"

Another rush by the longhorns tore Parker from Anthony's grasp. Ben himself was knocked down and gashed slightly. When he fought his way up he could not see Caddo.

The steers had found a leader now, a gaunt beast whose hide gleamed in the moonlight. Instead of milling frantically, tossing their horns and pitching, the cattle turned up the gulch, and rushed ahead with a fury no human hand could have stayed. No man tried. Walt Earnest was pulled out of their path by Keith Maitland. Jess Allman's leg bled from a gash.

In the wake of the cattle's rush were found the broken bodies of Caddo Parker and the last of his range wolves. Caddo was a horrible sight. The horns and hoofs of a half-hundred steers had punished his corpse until it was beyond recognition.

"Well," Keith Maitland said philosophically, "that saves us a hanging."

Then Keith glared at Ben from under his bushy eyebrows. "He was calling for Odell and talking about getting even. What does that make to you, Ben?"

Anthony hesitated. He knew a little of how Odell had worked with Sledge and Parker. He could have learned more. He wanted to defend his friend but he couldn't find the words, grope though he may.

"I think," growled Cameron, "we'd better talk to Odell. Where is he?"

One of Keith's nephews volunteered the information that Harry had broken into flight when Caddo had first called out for him.

"We thought he was just yellow. That German went with him."

"Take their trail," Maitland shouted. "Odell will get his chance to talk."

"It'll take some tall talking," promised Al Cameron.

"No," growled Ben. "Odell wasn't in deep." He searched his brain for further defense. "How do you know he wasn't playing Caddo for a sucker?" he demanded. "He figured out this layout, didn't he? He showed us this ambush, didn't he?"

"That ain't enough," snapped Maitland. "Where there is so much smoke there is bound to be fire. Odell will get his chance, Ben. But we're going after him."

"No," Ben said stubbornly. All along his loyalty to Odell and to Walt had been his weakness. They looked at him and knew he would not budge.

"Ben, dang it," exploded Al, "you can't take up for a man who worked with rustlers?"

"I haven't been shown he did," was the dogged answer. But in his heart Anthony knew he was wrong. He *had* been shown.

There was a strained silence. Maitland and Cameron studied the big man with grim bitter eyes. They appreciated what Ben had done. They appreciated why he took this stand. But their suspicions and their dislikes of Odell had been curbed too long because of Anthony and Walt Earnest.

"We're going after him, Ben," Maitland said softly. He turned upon Walt.

"Hear that, Walt?" he said harshly. "We're going after him."

"I heard you," was the stolid answer.

THE sound of an approaching horse stopped their argument. They waited for the rider to come down and then called a challenge to him. Fritz Warner answered back. Then the German rode into the gulch. He still carried his rifle across his lap.

Nobody spoke for a moment. Then Cameron growled:

"So you ducked out when the shooting started? We won't forget that, Warner."

Warner's face lost its impassiveness. Something akin to a smile flashed there.

"I had shooting of my own to do," he said stiffly. "I had decided that this night I would kill Harry Odell."

"Odell! You followed him!" exclaimed Keith.

"Yes," Fritz nodded. His glance met

Anthony's. "It was something I had to do."

Ben's head dropped and they saw his shoulders heave in a sigh. "Bueno, Fritz," he murmured.

Then he turned and stalked off into the darkness. They heard him mount his horse and gallop away.

"You killed Odell?" Maitland demanded of Warner.

"Yes."

Keith coughed. "Sorry I went off half-cocked, Warner," he said gruffly. "I always shoot off my mouth too much."

"It does not matter," Fritz said evenly. "I shall go home now."

"Wait a minute," said Cameron. "I shot off my mouth, too. Here's my hand, Warner."

Fritz studied the outstretched hand a moment, startled. Then, with even more of a smile on his broad face, he shook it.

Another silence. Then Maitland shrugged his shoulders. "I guess this night's work is done. Let's ride."

Walt spoke up. "You boys might give me a hand. Gotta get my steers back on my range."

They drove the longhorns back to the flat where Caddo Parker had found them.

Then they broke up, each man riding his own way. Walt Earnest clung to his saddle horn to keep from falling as everything went black before him. His well-trained horse found its own way to his gate and there, lying on the ground not three feet from the fence, Bess found him next morning.

She dragged him into the house and galloped for the doctor. When they returned Walt was still breathing, but the outspoken Dr. Sam Dorris was not optimistic about his chances.

"I told the danged fool he had to stop this hard riding," he exploded. "And he went getting mixed up in that shooting over at Freeman's Gulch."

Walt opened his eyes. "I'll live to bury you yet, you old faker," he whispered.

"He'll live," the doctor said to Bess. "He's too danged ornery to die like a white man."

Bess cried in relief. She was still crying when Ben rode up. His face was strained as he dismounted.

"How's Walt?" he asked anxiously.

"The doctor says he'll live. But no more hard riding. That may kill him."

Ben fumbled in his pockets. "I got something for him," he said slowly. "The mortgage against the Wide S."

"Ben, you didn't pay . . . !"

"No," he interrupted. "I talked to Marvin Sledge last night. Sledge has decided this ain't a healthy climate for him. He's already gone. He left some notes. Souvenirs to give his friends. Goodbye presents, I guess you'd call 'em."

"Ben, was Sledge in with Odell and Parker?"

"How did you know about Harry?" he countered.

"Cora Maitland was over here to see about Dad. She told me. That Fritz killed . . ."

Her voice broke off in a sob. "I'm sorry," Ben murmured. "I had hoped to get away—before you knew."

"Get away! Ben, you aren't leaving!"

"Yes," he nodded.

"Why?" she demanded. "Because of Harry?"

"Yes," he said again.

"You can't leave, Ben," she said gently. "Walt and I won't let you."

"No," he refused. "I'm sorry for Walt. But a man has to find his own range, Bess."

"Yes," she agreed, "a man must. But your trouble, Ben Anthony, is that when you've found it you don't have sense enough to realize it."

"But Harry . . . !" he protested. "He was . . ."

"Yes," Bess agreed. "That was your fault, Ben Anthony. You should have known all along."

"But you were . . . !"

"Of course. How was I to know, Ben? Why did you wait until I had promised Harry . . . to kiss me?"

"I don't know," he confessed. A smile broke across his broad face. "I never could figure that out myself."

Walt called from the house. "I must see what Dad wants," Bess said slowly. But she was unwilling to leave. Her eyes didn't want to leave his face.

"Go see about the old buzzard," Ben Anthony grinned. "I'll be around here a spell."

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